Application of Leadership Theories in Higher Distance Education Leadership

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Abstract

With changes in the hardware and software aspects of the campus as well as in their missions as traditional models of educational leadership do not meet the needs and requirements of the present needs and technologies, the need for new models of leadership is felt more than ever. So far, different models and theories of academic management and leadership have been provided but it seems that the field of distance higher education requires a separate model of traditional universities according to the specific characteristics of the educational system. This can help managers and leaders and presents appropriate solutions to the problems faced by universities. This study explores theories that can affect distance education leadership.

Keywords: educational leadership, academic leadership, higher education, distance education.
1. Introduction

The emergence of social organizations and the increasing expansion of such organizations is one of the remarkable features of human civilization. It is obvious that any social organization needs management and leadership in order to achieve its goals and specific objectives. Therefore, we need significantly-developed leadership and management in all fields of social activity particularly in higher education.

Universities and higher education institutions are the major academic institutions in the production of knowledge, technology and training of students and scientists. These organizations should always take steps in the way of perfection and move along with the excellent organizations at the forefront of the competitive environment. Universities should have the required empowerment, independence, mobility and flexibility, adaptability with environment, responsibility, accountability and legitimacy to fulfill the needs of the universities. This is not possible without effective leadership (Saatchi & Azizpour, 2005).

Leadership is the most efficient and cost-effective strategy known for organizations that want to survive and progress. In other words, effective academic leadership can be one of the most significant points of the university in a competition-based system to meet the changes and developments (Ramsden, 1998). Over the years, leadership has been defined and outlined in different ways. However, Valesky and Owenz (2014) believe that most definitions of leadership agree on one thing. First, leadership is a group rather than individual process. Secondly, leaders try actually to influence the behavior of others. Thus, the concept of leadership makes sense by influencing the behavior of others through social interaction.

Today, open and distance education plays an important role in human development, economic growth and cultural excellence, and results in achieving social goals such as educational justice. The need for knowledge and learning is increasingly centered on daily and work activities through the people's lives so that lifelong learning is a vital necessity for today's global economy and growth of distance learning is developing. Therefore, distance education universities need an efficient strategy; that is distance education leadership, in order to achieve their objectives.

2. Academic leadership

Due to characteristics such as responsibility for the missions, trying teamwork and special activities in an academic and scientific environment, university or academic leadership is less well defined (Yielder & Codling, 2004). Therefore, it is necessary to provide a definition of the term academic and academic leadership in order to resolve ambiguities in this area. The words academic and management can be attributed to different aspects of leadership or decision-making and both contain determining direction, mission, vision and goals for the future (Yielder & Codling, 2004). What is expected of managers is doing right things and make an ethical-professional and personal relationship among those who are in leadership positions (Osseo-Asare, Long bottom & Murphy, 2005). In addition, Middle Hurst (1993)...
also raises five common concepts of academic leadership: 1. responsibility, 2. directing the others, 3. affecting the results, 4. commanding subordinates, and 5. separating themselves (the leaders) from others (Gordon, 2002).

Sinclair mentioned five categories for successful managers of universities: 1. management of university organization, 2. Academic management 3. Economic management 4. change management, and 5. symbols management. The five categories, which show duties of the leader managing the university, indicate a comprehensive review of the academic management (Yamani, 2012).

Ramsden (1998) views principles of academic leadership consisting of a dynamic process, outcomes-based program, multilevel operations, contingency leadership, leadership learning and transformative leadership.

3. Leadership in higher distance education

Over the years, attempts have been made to provide a theoretical framework for the field of distance education. For example, Wedemeyer (1971) uses the concept of independent, free and personal study to explain distance education. Peters (1983) considers distance education as a model based on industrialization process, the use of labor division and mass production technology. He designs an organizational and managerial theory for distance education. Holmberg (1989, 1995) believes that distance education is guided by the concept of educational negotiation and states ongoing relationship between the learner-learner and educational institute. Moore (1991, & 1993) explains transactional distance in distance education theory. He believes that transactional distance depends on training rather than geography, and requires distinctive teaching practices and organizations. Keegan (1993) knows the learner and tutor distance in the learning as the characteristic of distance education and sees the involvement of an educational organization in the teaching-learning process as one of the elements of distance education. Garrison (2000) knows new theoretical frameworks necessary for determining the status of distance education as a practical strong field that fits information technology. He emphasizes interaction rather than physical distance. Anderson (2004) provided the beginning of the online learning theory.

Studies show that there is a few research conducted on management and organization in distance education and most of them have interpretive rather empirical aspect (Paul, 2014). In addition, researchers paid less attention to the leadership category in distance education and especially higher distance education. Thus, it should be noted that leadership in higher distance educational institute have similarities and differences with other organizations and traditional universities that requires selecting an appropriate model.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) suggest that distance education requires special organizational and managerial arrangements. Given the role of distance education leaders to design innovative courses and presentation processes, the use of an appropriate technology for providing training, preparing faculty for their new role as facilitator and monitoring the
changing role of students for interact and collaboration due to their active role in learning make the nature of leaders' roles in the distance education program different from other services or departments (Holmberg, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Beaudoin (2003) considers leadership needs in distance education as (1) the creation of the conditions for change and innovation, (2) enabling individuals and organizations to share a vision and move towards it, and (3) contribution and collaboration in operationalization of the ideas.

Distance education environment needs leaders of a clear perspective on distance education and its place in higher education institutions; leaders who have good human skills that enable them to work with staff, faculty and students; understand the selection process of emerging technologies and innovation; are aware of the process of curriculum design, essential theories of teaching and learning and characteristics of adult learners and traditional elderly students; are able to manage change; and those who understand and able to apply outstanding leadership traits (Nworie, Houghton, & Oprandi 2012).

3. Leadership theories

Distance education can benefit from the proven leadership and related theories by exercising the related theories while looking for unique leadership framework for continuity of distance education leadership. Knowledge of leadership theories for distance education leaders and other higher education administrators will be valuable as they seek to establish a credible and sustainable distance education programs (Beaudoin, 2003; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Portugal, 2006). It is notable that distance education leader needs to evaluate the context in order to lead the distance education context where he works so that he can apply the leadership traits and theories in a right manner for his context.

3.1. Distinctive traits of leadership

Until 1945, most research and the most common method of leadership research focused distinctive traits of leadership meaning that there are certain characteristics that only those who have such traits are considered as potential leaders (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2000). Therefore, those individuals can play the leader's role in the organization that possess characteristics such as intelligence, extroversion, self-confidence, eloquence and charisma, beauty and attractiveness and so forth. It seems that this method does not have strong scientific support because specific characteristics should be found according to the validity of this attitude that all leaders must have them while the results of the studies contradict each other, and the list of the characteristics is so long that lost its validity (Robbins & Judge, 2013). Leadership characteristics and situation qualities must be considered to determine appropriate leadership, and distance higher education is so complex that its effectiveness cannot be attributed to a unique factor.
3.2. Leadership behavior theories

Behavioral theories of leadership formulated with an emphasis on leadership behavior rather than his personal characteristics during 1945. Research at Ohio and Michigan State Universities and Blake and Morten management network are considered in this classification (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001). According to the studies of total activities of organizational leaders and managers, leaders' behavior can be divided into two categories:

- Task-oriented behavior: leaders who are going to achieve organizational goals by caring the work (tasks).
- Humanism behavior: leaders who are going to achieve organizational goals by caring staff and humans.

The turning point of this theory is that leadership is not intrinsic and leaders' behavior must be considered. Thus, it is necessary to educate individuals to lead universities and distance education centers in order to be able to guide university to its goals by appropriate leadership behavior. It is noteworthy that training programs and courses should be tailored to the characteristics of the distance higher education system.

3.3. Situational theories

Contingency hypotheses believe that effective leadership depends on the relationship between personality characteristics and leader's behavior and situational variables such as the task structure, authority and subordinates' attitudes and skills. Hence, the best leadership style does not exist. Conditional approaches seek to predict in what type of different situations any leader will be effective (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Fiedler's Contingency Model, House’s Path-Goal Theory and Hersey and Blanchard situational leadership include this classification.

According to Tipple (2010), situational leadership is related to distance education because distance education context deals with the widespread changes in some aspects. Tipple identified several changes that occur in distance education in higher education:

1. A highly competitive global environment where customers (students) can easily go from one online university to another university.
2. Increased customer (student) demand for higher quality education at a lower cost.
3. Redefinition of the mission beyond geographical boundaries.
4. Organizational structure change from the academic concentrated face-to-face position to a virtual (global) environment.
5. Training, motivation and guidance of continually expanding faculty population.
6. Technology of constant change.

3.4. Transformational leadership theory

Transformational leaders refer to those ones that are trying to create new ideas and perspectives in order to provide a new path of growth and prosperity with their organizations.
and mobilize organizational members to make fundamental changes and transformations in the elements and foundations of organization in order to achieve capabilities needed to move in a new direction and achieve higher degrees of ideal performance by making great commitment and passion among managers and employees.

Transformational leadership is known by four indices (Bass, 1995; Bass et al, 2003). The indicators include:

Ideal influence: transformational leaders can influence their followers through respect, trust and commitment and thus motivate the effort required to achieve optimal levels of performance in their followers.

Personal considerations: transformational leaders are able to recognize the followers' needs and abilities and accompany them. Moreover, they coach their personnel well and provide good feedback.

Spiritual motivation: transformational leaders give power to individuals by talking to people, increase optimism and enthusiasm and relate their insight of the future to their competence. They provide insight motivate ability needed to perform high levels of performance in persons.

Mental encouragement: transformational leaders consider different perspectives when solving problems. They challenge the status quo and create grounds for followers" thinking.

The existence of various changes in the area of distance education in higher education justifies the attention to transformational leadership theory. Newtzie (2002) and Irlbeck (2001) suggest that application of transformational leadership concepts can help distance education leaders (cited in Lustik, 2008). Transformational leaders of distance education in higher education can create a clear vision for university and guide university to achieve its mission. A transformational leader has strategic thoughts of distance education and recognizes people's different capabilities (Shahzadi & Qureshi, 2013).

3.5. Leadership complexity theory

Leadership complexity theory introduces a new aspect to understand leadership; that is, the focus of individual leader shifts toward the context that affects the leader performance and outcomes. Complexity leadership is based on the belief that external effects should be investigated and includes as the same as the internal environment of organizations in an effort to understand the role of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007). According to the theory, adaptation emerges in a complex ground of fields and mechanisms. There are two levels of interaction and interdependency.

1. Interaction of factors that results in generating ideas and knowledge.
2. Interaction of ideas and knowledge, which in turn results in generating complex ideas and knowledge (Bazyar & Fesharaki, 2013)

Complexity leadership encourages collaboration, flexibility, systems thinking, reflection, innovative solutions and adaption of organizational structures. This illustrates necessary issues for the field of distance education in higher education, and application of complexity.
leadership can have desired outcomes for distance education context and distance education leadership because the field of distance education is evolving in a variety of areas such as educational leadership, curriculum design and delivery, technology selection, support of faculty and so forth.

6. A model for higher education leadership

![Diagram of higher education leadership model]

Figure 1: higher distance education leaders abilities
According to Figure 1, it can be concluded that higher education leaders should have the following abilities:
Transformational: leader encourages people to work more than what they think they have the ability and has a provocative role.
Humanism: leader should be able to work effectively with different people, personnel, faculties, students and other stakeholders in distance education system.
Strategy and insight: leaders should create a shared vision for future direction and a clear vision for the university according to the status quo and its' challenge.
Global leadership: development of distance education outside the geographical boundaries requires the leader to be aware of the cultures and values of different communities and act accordingly.
Information technology leadership: today, growth of information technology is a major challenge for higher education institutions and its leaders and leadership in higher education institutions needs to have the ability to lead technological changes.

7. Conclusion

Continued success and future of distance education depend on its effective leadership. Creation of a vision for the future, provision of a path for the effective use of technology, immediate change management, supervision of staff, and faculty guidance in the transition from face to face learning context to a virtual context and the use of proper training of higher education need effective leadership. The leader in distance education should understand the use and results of leadership theories as their expression and values and their institutional needs. Effective leadership asks the leader to understand the followers, talk to them, take care of them, and enable them to maximize their role. Knowledge of different leadership styles and theories can enable the leader to be more adaptable to the changing environment. In addition to understanding different leadership styles and theories, leaders must be aware of their preferred leadership style so that they can be better adaptable and more secure to changing conditions. Finally, selection of a proper model for leadership in the higher education system of distance education results in its excellence and expansion of the systems.
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