

Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education: Strategic Implications for Academic Leaders

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The topic of emotional intelligence and academic leadership has strategic implications. The purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in the area of higher education. The literature revealed that academic leaders have a strategic role within the administrative function and can benefit from the development of emotional intelligence competencies. Future research on this subject could include a conceptual model linking emotional intelligence and academic leadership outcomes. Moreover, hypotheses could be developed and tested to see if a relationship exists between the variables.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic leadership matters. Leadership focuses upon the attainment of organizational goals by working primarily with and through people (Wren, 2005). Businesses and organizations depend heavily upon good leadership and strong performance. Rapid technological change, global competitiveness, flatter hierarchies, team-centered structures, societal shifts, 21st century service economy skills, and sophisticated customer demands are but a few of the forces pressuring organizations to lead and perform at increasingly high levels (Drucker, 1999).

Researchers and practitioners have been interested in determining what makes a leader effective and how do great leaders wield power and influence within organizations (Bennis, 1984; Collins, 2001; Greenleaf, 2002; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Ireland & Hitt, 2005). Owners, executives, and managers who make strategic decisions for an organization shoulder a large amount of responsibility and accountability. These individuals need to have distinctive knowledge, skills, and abilities to succeed. They operate essentially as team captains who build, develop, inspire, challenge, and reward others in creative ways. They anticipate trends, envision possibilities, communicate objectives, share information, and encourage feedback. These leaders need to be energetic, accurate, and passionate toward achieving results, while expressing integrity, humility, and empathy toward others. Strategic leaders, in other words, need to be emotionally intelligent. Goleman (1998) noted that leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence tend to boost performance and get results. According to Hill and Jones (2004) the theory and practice of emotional intelligence fits well within the framework of strategic leadership research.

Academic Leadership

Strategic leaders in the realm of higher education, like other employees in positions of responsibility, should possess positive leadership attributes (Morrill, 2007). Julius, Baldrige, and Pfeffer (1999), noted that universities are unique and essentially people-processing organizations. Building consensus among various constituencies becomes a critical task for educational leaders. Similarly, Leaming (2003)

proclaimed, “Today’s leaders must strive to create consensus if they are to realize their goals, see their visions become reality, and become effective leaders. ...I believe this to be especially true for all of us who are academic leaders” (p. 43).

According to a review of the literature, effective leadership depends upon having personnel with *emotional intelligence* working in key areas within the organization. Determining desirable personal characteristics, such as *emotional quotient* (EQ) competencies, help in finding and maintaining employees with positive potential. *Harvard Business Essentials* (2002) noted, “Since interpersonal skills and behavior are intimately connected, understanding a candidate’s interpersonal skills is an important part of the hiring decision process” (p. 4). Likewise, Murphy (2006) wrote, “Contrary to popular belief, technical skills are not the primary reason why new hires fail; instead, poor interpersonal skills dominate the list, flaws that many of their managers admit were overlooked during the interview process” (p. 33). Similarly, Vandervoort (2006) stressed the need for improvement of faculty and administrative working relationships through better intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. The author also recommended including high emotional intelligence as part of faculty job qualifications.

Academic leaders, such as deans, face multiple challenges in leading change efforts, balancing stakeholder interests, maintaining departmental status, evaluating faculty performance, performing fiscal responsibilities, etc. (Leaming, 1998; Morrill, 2007; Tucker & Bryan, 1991; Wolverson & Gmelch, 2002). These challenges, along with others, have impacted the long term stability of academic leadership positions. For instance, Henninger (1998) addressed the limiting factors placed upon business school deans during the accreditation process. The author stated, “The overlapping structures of the institution spread the loci of control among institutional standards, business school standards, and disciplinary and individual faculty expectations and may constrain the dean’s leadership role and ability to facilitate faculty involvement in educational reform” (p. 203). Fee, Hadlock, and Pierce (2005) provided findings concerning the relationship between the turnover rate of business school deans and MBA program rankings (1990-2002). The authors used data from *Business Week* and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings to determine if business school deans were penalized or rewarded according to their graduate program standings. According to an article written in *The Economist*, the average tenure for deans has dropped significantly during the past ten years. The article indicated that average tenure for deans, in recent years, had slipped from approximately one to two decades in the same position to only three to five years. New demands and pressures included full-time fundraising, project development, and positive school imaging (*Light on their feet*, 2006).

Moreover, O’Reilly and Wyatt (1994) presented a perplexing dilemma concerning the fate of business school deans. The authors expounded upon the increasingly shorter tenure spans and challenging set of demands being placed upon academic administrators. Tense relationships between deans and faculty are explored, while case examples of dean failures are highlighted. Exhibiting positive leadership, constructive communication, and cooperative collaboration appears vital to a dean’s long-term satisfaction and success.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

One of the earliest contributors to the study of emotional intelligence was E. L. Thorndike (1920) who developed an innovative way to describe intelligence. He viewed a major component of human intelligence as *social intelligence* which means the ability to function in interpersonal situations. The study of intelligence in the emotional realm continued to develop over time. According to Stein and Book (2000), “In 1983, Howard Gardner, at Harvard University, wrote about the possibility of ‘multiple intelligences,’ including what he called ‘intra-physic capacities’ — in essence, an aptitude for introspection — and ‘personal intelligence’” (p. 15). Major contributors since Gardner’s time include Mayer-Salovey, Goleman, and Bar-On. The Mayer-Salovey model defines emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, understand, manage and use emotions to facilitate thinking. The Goleman model views emotional intelligence as an array of emotional and social competencies that contribute to managerial performance. The Bar-On model describes emotional intelligence as a cross-section of

interrelated emotional and social competencies, skills, and facilitators that impact intelligent behavior. Bar-On's model focuses on an individual's ability to cope and people tested with average (90-109) to above average EQ-i scores are considered emotionally intelligent. The EQ competencies supporting emotional intelligence are categorized into 5 composite and 15 subscale competencies. Thus, the EQ competencies provide detailed insight into what actually comprises emotional intelligent coping behaviors (Bar-On, 2004).

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Development

Emotional intelligence can be enhanced through training and development methods. Stein and Book (2000) contended that emotional intelligence, "Is made up of short-term, tactical, 'dynamic' skills that can be brought into play as the situation warrants. Thus the individual building blocks of emotional intelligence—and its overall structure—can be improved by means of training, coaching, and experience" (p. 21). Similarly, Bar-On (2004) stated, "Emotional intelligence and emotional skills develop over time, change throughout life, and can be improved through training and remedial programs as well as therapeutic techniques" (p. 15).

Other contributors to emotional intelligence research have focused on the development of people through coaching, counseling, teaching, and mentoring. For instance, Boyatzis, Smith, and Blaize (2006) analyzed the importance of relationship building. The authors proposed that aspects of emotional intelligence such as coaching others with compassion reduce employee stress, improve holistic wellness, and enhance organizational leadership. Goleman, Boyatzis, and Mckee (2004) emphasized the need to further explore within the field of *leader resonance* and *mood management* to better understand the impact of emotional intelligence on business results. Conger (2004) offered reassurance to individuals seeking to better understand the nature and development of self-awareness as well as other emotional intelligence traits.

Emotionally intelligent leaders display *self-awareness* which translates into a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, values, and motives (Goleman, 2000). In addition, self-awareness includes an individual's strong sense of passion, purpose, and direction. According to Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2004), "Many outstanding leaders, in fact, bring to their work life the thoughtful mode of self-reflection that they cultivate in their spiritual lives. For some this means prayer or meditation; for others it's a more philosophical quest for self-understanding" (p. 40).

One positive aspect of emotional intelligence stems from the belief that managers can learn and enhance their emotional leadership skills. Conger (2004) offered reassurance to individuals seeking to better understand the nature and development of self-awareness as well as other emotional intelligence traits. He argued, "Many factors shape the extent to which an individual becomes a leader, including genetic predisposition, family environment, school experiences, hardships, job experiences, bosses, organizational incentives, and training. It is not a matter of whether leaders are born or made. They are born and made" (p. 136). Goleman, like Conger, agreed with the notion that emotional intelligence can be both inherited and acquired. Goleman (1998) claimed, "Unlike IQ, which changes little after our teen years, emotional intelligence seems to be largely learned, and it continues to develop as we go through life and learn from our experiences—our competence in it can keep growing" (p. 7).

DISCUSSION

Research has been linked to discovering combinations of EQ competencies that best predict satisfaction and/or performance outcomes for various occupational groups. Druskat, Sala, and Mount (2006) included one of Bar-On's studies on the impact of emotional intelligence on performance. According to the authors, the results from the study indicated that: "It is possible to scientifically develop EI models within organizations that can be used to accurately predict performance in various occupations. These models can be and are reliably employed to recruit, hire, and promote potentially effective employees" (p. 17). Similarly, Stein and Book (2000) discovered combinations of ideal EQ competencies

for various occupations. The authors found that people most satisfied with their work tend to possess the emotional characteristics most needed for that particular position (p. 262).

Bar-On (2004) cited an EQ study of 314 North American participants where the amount of association between EQ variables and work satisfaction were determined. The author stated, "For the research studies presented here, samples of heterogeneous groups of professionals were used to show that there is a link between EQ-i scores and job performance/satisfaction" (p. 127). Bar-On (2004) also contained a study that considered the impact of EI on performance for U.S. Air Force recruiters. The study presented EQ mean scores for 461 successful recruiters as compared to 149 unsuccessful recruiters. The successful recruiters had EQ-i mean scores ranging from a high of 108.8 for Self Regard to a low of 99.3 for Interpersonal Relationship (p. 133). Bar-On (2004) also conducted a study of 1,125 first-year military academy students in order to differentiate among successful, average, and unsuccessful self perceptions. The students who perceived themselves as successful scored higher on the EQ-i assessment with EQ-i mean scores ranging from a high of 111.1 for Self Regard to a low of 94.2 for Empathy; whereas students with unsuccessful self perceptions scored from a high of 100.0 for Social Responsibility to a low of 82.4 for Empathy (p. 132). Bar-On (2004) concluded that: "For the most part, the results suggest that people who perceive themselves as being more successful have significantly higher EQ-i scores than people who feel less successful. These results suggest that emotional intelligence is significantly related to self-perceived success" (p. 131).

SUMMARY

In conclusion, the topic of emotional intelligence has strategic implications within higher education. Academic leaders have a major role to fulfill within the administrative domain. These individuals need to manage complex situations through effective planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. They have to respond effectively to various organizational stakeholders both inside and outside their respective institutions. Individuals in positions of academic leadership could benefit from learning more about the role emotional intelligence has in organizational success. Future research on this subject could include the development of a conceptual model linking emotional intelligence and academic leadership outcomes. Moreover, hypotheses could be developed and tested to see if a relationship exists between the variables.

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