Values, visions, strategies and goals: Is coaching a viable pathway?

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There is no doubt that higher education is in a state of continuous change. Academics have to consider how they balance teaching, research, and community and professional involvement. Alongside this they have to offer leadership and manage change, which in turn demands an understanding of the shifting relationships between information, finance, physical and human resources and quality control. Some of the challenging agendas resulting from the management of these functions can be mapped against external, often politically-motivated shifts within the education culture. Others enter the realm of personal responsibility and personal choice.

In this context, to be a successful researcher often means balancing the demands of leadership agendas – breadth of knowledge, strategic planning and resource management) against the personally motivated activities of a research agenda – (creativity, originality, discipline based identity and allegiances).

In this paper we examine how existing support systems such as mentoring empower individuals to prioritise research or enable a balance to be made between management roles and research activity. Secondly we examine the role coaching might play in this context. The paper provides a case study of the coaching experience from the viewpoint of a senior academic who has recently made a transition between educational institutions. We offer insights into different management styles and examine strategies for leadership and working relationships, which includes reflection on working methods and the capacity for change as a form of personal development.

Introduction

In this paper, we are concerned with the complexities inherent in balancing the importance of personal agency with an understanding of and a desire to change the structural conditions found within the gendered, globalise and managerially conditioned 21st century university. The external pressures of globalization, managerialism and government intervention are challenging the traditional values of collegiality and independence within the university. Internally, Universities have always been 'gendered' and dominated by male cultural 'norms', which are described as rational, logical, analytical, rules-based and hierarchical (Ross-Smith, Chesterman and Peters, 2003, p. 1). These dominant 'norms' have given less voice

to diversity and equality, and have under-valued support work, and collegial environments, or concern for people in supportive cultures where coaching is seen to be an integral element. Women move between fitting into these cultural norms and becoming 'token men' or become change agents, where as outsiders to the dominant mainstream masculinist culture their position of marginality is a location for radical critique and creativity (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 5).

The research and observations upon which this paper is based have arisen out of a dialogue between two senior women. One with responsibility for organising the leadership program at Curtin University of Technology; and the other, a participant in that program after joining the University as a new member of staff from an overseas University. Our collective interest is to focus efforts on looking at the complexity of 'more than one goal at a time'. For as Csikszentmihalyi notes:

> *The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow. But this becomes possible only if one keeps in mind more than one goal at a time, being aware at the same time of conflicting desires. It can happen only when the mind knows not only what is but also what could be (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 228).*

This paper therefore contains an evaluation of coaching, as the means of approaching what *could* be. This evaluation of coaching is then placed in the context of what *is*.

The catalyst for this evaluation of coaching was a session called 'Building Resourcefulness', an Australian Technology Network Women's Executive Development (ATN-WEXDEV) Program event held at Curtin University of Technology in November 2002. Coaching seemed an attractive option for exploring a mutually- identified set of goals in the context of improving professional performance and personal satisfaction. Coaching sessions were initiated for the new member of staff with an external coach. At this point, it was decided that an internal coach was not appropriate so a triangular relationship was established between the external coach, the ATN-WEXDEV manager (Groombridge) and the new member of staff (Worden). This decision turned out to be a significant contribution to the subsequent success of the coaching experience as it reinforced our initial concern which was to look at the intersection between systems of privilege in Universities and the individual's capacity for agency or resistance.

Method

One reason why this study relies on a case study of personal experience to test out possibilities and opportunities in the form of an action research project, is the low number and remoteness of senior women to act as mentors and as role models. There are senior women who admirably show what is achievable, but due to the confidential nature of much of their work, they are often isolated (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 10) and not in a position to take on a mentoring role. There is therefore much uncharted territory to explore, especially at the transition point to senior management roles. Women remain concentrated at the lower end of the academic hierarchy. In 2002 women accounted for 19.4 percent of associate professor and above (levels D and E) in Australian higher education as against 54.6 percent for associate lecturer (level A) (Carrington and Pratt, 2003, p. 6).

In taking a holistic approach, combining direct experience and feminist analysis, which incorporated learning, reflection and theorising, it was possible to bring together questions in a dialogue about the personal and about the organization. For example, the personal questions explored through the coaching included how to integrate past knowledge or learn from new situations.

In what ways do I need to fit in? How is my experience from previous contexts still useful? If so, in what way? Why is this process of change so overwhelming?

Reflections on the experience were recorded in notes made after a coaching session.

Have been finding a space to re-connect and recover priorities. Deeper realisation that the idea of claiming space for personal reflection is important. There are studies, which define the self as something that is formed in the context of relationships. How does coaching support this? Claiming time (a space) for creative thinking, for reflection and knowing about oneself. Coaching may offer the means of structuring that time in a more productive (reflexive way).

The theoretical challenge of this research has been to use this case study of the coaching experience to inform the findings of feminist analysis of university organizational structures and working practices. Although one of the objectives of a feminist approach is to favour collective action as a means of change within organizations, there is also within this a place for individual contributions. In either case, gender is 'a matrix of habits, practices and discourses, not always a stable and enduring construct but sometimes fluid and malleable' (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 3). Gender systems are therefore not fixed, but respond to and contribute to change. For feminist epistemology, one way forward is to examine one's personal, social and human location both as a source of insight and as a means of highlighting prejudice (Garrett and Middlehurst, 1998, p. 22).

The importance of dialogue is already acknowledged in the Curtin Leadership Program and has also informed this evaluation. As Senge (1990, p. 241-2) suggests, the purpose of dialogue is 'to go beyond any one individual's understanding... In dialogue, individuals gain insights that simply could not be achieved individually'. Participants suspend their assumptions and communicate freely. This 'brings to the surface the full depth of people's experience and thought, and yet it can move beyond their individual view.' In dialogue people become observers of their own thinking. Dialogue helped us to see the representative and the participatory nature of thought. This reflexivity was an empowering aspect of the coaching itself and the means by which the evaluation of coaching was connected to questions about change within the university. Dialogue is also a 'process of intellectual enquiry rather than of advocacy, a search for truth rather than a contest' (Charan, 2002, p. 147). This means that people feel emotionally committed to the outcome, become energised and ready to act. Dialogue was an important process as part of the coaching experience, which allowed self-reflection for the participant (Worden) and an opportunity for the manager (Groombridge) to contribute to the learning process.

The wider context: Working in 'greedy' institutions

Universities are changing internationally and becoming more and more complex. 'Collegial structures co-exist with bureaucratic hierarchies...each overlaid by political and cybernetic processes' (Middlehurst, 1997, p. 7). According to Marshall, Adams, Cameron and Sullivan (2000), there are more diverse student populations undertaking a broader range of programs that have to reflect social justice objectives. Information technology has transformed teaching and research methods. There are larger and more diverse arenas of operation and increased selectivity and concentration of research activity. In a framework for considering effective leadership and management in higher education, these authors suggest that effective leaders and managers need to develop knowledge and skills over seven areas (Marshall, et al., 2000, p. 42).

These include

- Professional identity;
- Academic leadership and management;
- Strategic leadership and management;
- Operational leadership and management;
- Information management;
- Financial and physical resource management;
- Human resources management.

Traditionally, academics have valued those areas most related to teaching, research and community outreach while expert support staff have concentrated on those areas associated with the effective running of the institution. Devolution, downsizing and restructuring have changed this balance. Expectations are broader and constantly changing, leading to perceptions of the 'un-doable' job. According to Coaldrake and Stedman (1999, p. 9):

> *Academic work has stretched rather than adapted to meet the challenges posed by transformations of the higher education sector. The preference of many Universities and individual academics is to allow accumulation and accretion rather than to undertake the more difficult and threatening task of making strategic choices and reconceptualising what it means to be an effective and productive academic.*

Currie, Thiele and Harris (2002, p. 177) have described the extent to which Universities have changed in response to globalization and that this process has been matched with an increase in managerial culture within which the 'male norm' drives many aspects of the gendered university. Through their account they draw attention to ' the particular discomforts arising out of the new forms of entrepreneurial patriarchy' (Currie. et al., p. 177). To this they add the concept of the 'greedy' institutions (Currie. et al., p. 159). Women are often caught between the two greedy institutions of family and corporatised university. 'Like housework, academic work is never really done' (Acker, 1994, p. 126). The demands on academics to 'publish or perish', the promotion system which rewards productivity through the number of research publications and grants and the PhD as an essential academic qualification all add weight to a male research-dominated career pattern that also values mobility and conformity to the male managerial norms.

For women who do succeed the costs are often high. Women work longer hours, live up to expectations for career and research achievements based on a male career trajectory, and support colleagues and students. Even though their achievements are high, they *'feel bad'* because the academic reward system is out of sync with their efforts' (Currie. et al., 2002, p. 144). For promotion, women often undervalue their credentials (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 7). As Acker has suggested, 'their intense dedication meant either that they failed to note advancement opportunities or that they became so identified with the particular responsibility that no-one thought of them as candidates for promotion' (Acker, 1994, p. 129). Ross-Smith, Chesterman and Peters (2003 p. 16) have noted that,

> *deeply gendered assumptions that still prevail in organizations may be working to make women sense that they are not legitimately in senior positions and that they must be more careful and cautious.*

There is therefore an underlying sense of insecurity. Women are often reluctant to seek senior positions until absolutely certain of their own abilities and experience. For some this was a lack of confidence. Others saw senior jobs as unmanageable, preferring to balance work and personal life, or wished to stay in contact with students or their research.

Mentoring

Against the expectations of this narrow management profile we explore how it is possible to consider more individual and personal forms of agency, for women to achieve senior posts. Isolation has a detrimental effect on women academic's self-confidence, which is a crucial ingredient for securing promotion in academic life (Garrett and Middlehurst, 1998, p. 20). Mentoring and more general support for senior women from chief executive level is critically important to the promotion of women in senior positions (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 11). Projects to increase networking skills and opportunities alleviate this as do projects offering mentoring to newly appointed staff. Successful mentors are expected to be symbolic analysts who 'tend to the interpretive side of the academic enterprise and ensure that the organization's culture remains true to basic academic ideals' (Tierney, 2001, p. 14). Mentoring can be effective when it combats feelings of isolation and non-recognition of gender as an issue. It can challenge old boys networks but is often not sufficiently valued. Mentoring is a conventional development strategy (McPhee, 2000, p. 8) and is commonplace within university leadership programs but it can be problematic finding suitable mentors for senior women. Coaching skills are recognised as one of the skills of a successful mentor. Can coaching schemes extend and improve the success of mentoring, already explored through ATN-WEXDEV projects, or is coaching, on its own, an alternative? Can coaching help counteract the insecurity that even successful women may feel? Or, more holistically, if coaching skills can extend the managerial profile of Universities, will they then become more equitable institutions for everyone?

The Curtin context for the ATN-WEXDEV program

The Australian Technology Network (ATN) Women's Executive Development Program (WEXDEV) for senior women only, commenced at Curtin as part of an inter-institutional ATN project in 1996. The Program's goals, particularly in regard to senior women are:

- To provide support for, and contribute to the development of, all women at Curtin University of Technology with specific emphasis on leadership capabilities in line with Curtin University of Technology's vision, mission and goals;

- To provide particular support for the development of women for senior positions within the University;

- Provision or facilitation of lifelong learning that encompasses new and emerging paradigms of leadership.

The Program now includes all academic and general staff women at Curtin. Support through networking and assistance with career development, research and promotion have been provided for senior women. These goals are congruent with to the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Action Plan for Women (AVCC, 1999). Support for development is well recognised as being an important factor for women within higher education.

The need to encourage women to take up senior management roles is central to the University's Strategic Plan 2000-2005. The document 'Valuing Curtin Staff' maps out an agenda for the future needs of the University's most important asset, its staff. Among the key objectives is the need to develop people capabilities that support high performance achievement. This includes:

- Strategic planning and visioning;

- The ability to analyse and assess the needs of students and staff;

- The capacity to embrace the needs of the University rather than segments;
- The capacity for change;
- Establishing and maintaining commitment and trust.

Implicit in these capabilities is a reflexivity that implies personal change and adaptability. It was not difficult to relate coaching to the aims of the ATN-WEXDEV program or to the 'Valuing Curtin Staff' document. Coaching addressed the 'facilitation of lifelong learning' in the ATN-WEXDEV program and both the 'capacity for change' and the 'maintaining commitment and trust' in the 'Valuing Curtin Staff' document. The ATN-WEXDEV program is also embedded into the culture of the University through the Leadership Program, with links internally to the Ethics, Equity and Social Justice Plan and strengthened externally through the links across the ATN (Chesterman, 2003). In this context it is possible to establish critical mass to break down barriers; the work can then become part of broader collective action.

What is coaching?

There are different approaches to be found within coaching. Approaching the subject through an organization emphasised some aspects of its use within organizations that would be less immediately apparent in coaching that is more personally motivated. However, most coaching paradigms seek to integrate the personal with wider cultural issues. Coaching is therefore used to build personal resources, contribute to the development of working relationships and an organizational culture which sustains learning, innovation and success. Coaching is based on a partnership in which the aim is to encourage someone to reach his or her goals through self-awareness and with economy. This involves deep learning and is an on-going holistic process over time. Coaching involves reflection and change that starts with individuals, but it can also involve mapping that learning onto the rhetoric of the cultural ideals and the behaviours experienced in a university.

In the Curtin ATN-WEXDEV introductory session on coaching many participants felt coaching was a 'natural' part of a person's work within a university. Several participants appreciated the attention of a good listener who gave them one-to-one support. Coaching others was also seen as an integral part of an educational experience that encouraged a shared responsibility between facilitator and learner as offered within the university. Being able to coach was also seen as a desirable managerial skill.

As already mentioned, in studies of women in management in higher education, women are often seen as less individualistic than men. They are seen to approach management differently to men and are also considered to be concerned for people and more values driven. These studies highlight the importance for women of collaboration, consultation and relationships over hierarchical management (Daloz, 1999, p. 131). This can be counter-productive if it reinforces ideals about women's role in society as nurturers and carers, as these tight definitions can limit the possibilities for change and become 'problematic for women in leadership, drawing as it does on normative and essentialist images of women' (Ross-Smith et al., 2003, p. 9). Women become associated with the 'housework' in education. There is a fine line between these essentialist images and a view that places consultative and collaborative management styles, which are described as feminist, or 'instinctive values that women hold' (White, 2003, p. 45) in the context of diversity programs. White (2003) suggests that diversity management programs provide an effective strategy to support these values, with diversity being 'the quality of being different and unique at an individual or group level'. Such programs may encourage the university to do things differently.

Coaching can therefore be discussed in terms of educational and managerial provision, as part of the everyday activities of the organization. In subsequent informal discussions we, (the authors of this paper) realised that there were other more personalised aspects of coaching that seemed to offer opportunities for furthering the aims and objectives of the women's program. Even if things were OK, they could also be better! For instance the following 'take-away' statement, written as a result of the session, raises some of the issues.

> *I would like more discussion on: the distinction between having access to a professional coach (one to one) or where some of the philosophy could be integrated into other aspects of change (personal or institutional).*

Coaching sounded like rather good experience: plenty of attention and nurturing, an opportunity to grow and develop skills; to explore issues, focus on goals, assess the current situation; look at options and possible strategies and then act upon them. From coaching it is expected that:

- You take more effective and focused actions immediately;
- You set better goals;
- You stop putting up with what is dragging you down;
- You are more at peace with yourself;
- You handle life transitions more easily;
- You create momentum so it is easier to get results.

While being coached a person takes full responsibility for their choices and actions and the coach participates as a partner. The most important aspect of the early sessions is a building of trust so that further dialogue can take place in a trusting and secure environment.

> *Later assessment (April) was to see positive aspects of a working relationship built on trust. (Missing from current situation. This a learning experience.) But also what comes out of this is how important trust is as a factor in building positive professional working relationships. How are personal values related to leadership? What can be learnt from looking at Goleman's work on emotional intelligence?*

After reflecting on further coaching sessions, a list of topics emerged. There were now new ways to think about everyday activities and re-orientate action towards culture differences through re-location, extending academic support networks and taking on different roles in quick succession. This also relates to creating a balance between valuing an identity as a researcher and involvement in other managerial and teaching activities. The topics included:

- Resources: emotional intelligence issues. Building resources;
- Boundaries: implications in any discussion of personal development as well as day-to-day activities;
- Reflecting on emotions, and personal explanations;
- Rationalising the information, taking part in a learning experience and relating new information to past experience. Re-visiting previous assumptions in the light of new understanding;
- Finding the language to define what becomes evident, defining and naming;
- Depth? Language to explain the experience. Comparing experiential learning to the 'study of' or 'reading about' something;
- Space to visualise the broader picture, to move beyond existing ways of working and thinking, stretching, expanding and enriching;

- Doing something. Planning. Moving on;
- Energy, working smarter, not harder.

In addition to these context-specific responses to coaching, a further group of topics emerged from a broader reflection on the experience, and in the dialogue about leadership values and supporting women. The ATN-WEXDEV aim of 'facilitation of lifelong learning that encompasses a new and emerging paradigm of leadership' and 'Curtin Strategic Plan's 'capacity for change' can be related to coaching as a form of adult learning. The 'Curtin Strategic Plan' aim of 'establishing and maintaining commitment and trust' has already been shown to be central to the coaching experience. We also propose that coaching can positively relate to incremental change and can reinforce diversity.

Coaching in a university context: Adult learning

What we have learnt from this evaluation of coaching maps onto many educational ideas within adult learning and specifically experiential learning. Coaching can be valued in an individual's own learning but it can also be valued as part of the wider culture. The coaching model developed by Hudson (1999, p. 107) takes into account two basic patterns in an adult's life experience. They are either in a life chapter or a life transition. In a life chapter the world seems stable with opportunities to grow. In this context the focus of coaching is on performing, doing and achieving. In a life transition the world seems unreliable, chaotic and punishing. A person is likely to turn inward. Then the former chapter can be deconstructed through a cocooning experience, which is a time of transformation, growth and renewal. These phases form part of a cycle of change and can be explored through experiential adult learning, which lights a fire within the learner, and that fire translates into motivation, self-esteem, self-responsibility, growth and achievement (Hudson 1999).

If these aims are combined with critical theory and post-modern feminist theories it is possible to account for the multiple systems of privilege and oppression along with people's capacity for agency or resistance (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 347). This means that there is an emphasis on knowledge as human construction and social and institutional life as an enacted meaning, as embedded experience. Instead of causal links, concepts of contemporaneousness, convergence and synthesis become important. As Slattery (1995, p. 222) has noted:

> the content of the curriculum is the individual in the process of becoming that which he or she has not yet been but that which he or she is capable of becoming.

The capacity for incremental change

Meyerson (2001, p. 63) has described a 'spectrum of tempered change strategies' where there is evidence of positive change built on personal strategies of disruptive self expression, moving through verbal *jujitsu* and variable-term opportunism to strategic alliance building. While the disruptive act of self-expression is an individual act that feels personally right, it is an inconspicuous way to initiate change and its efficacy within corporate change can be long-lasting. If some aspects of coaching relate to the power of the individual, it is related to tempered change where it shares empowerment through the reinforcement of a sense of importance and conviction. Evolutionary change 'is gentle, incremental, decentralized, and over time produces a broad and lasting shift with less upheaval'. Meyerson also points out that the small-wins approach routs discrimination by fixing the organization, not the women who work for it. Women are freed from feelings of self-blame and anger that can come with invisible equity (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000, p. 136).

Valuing diversity and mainstreaming women's contribution to knowledge creation in higher education is not about supporting the male model as the norm. According to Brown, (2000, p. 7), 'Gender equality is not synonymous with sameness, with establishing men, their lifestyle and conditions as the norm'. Through the 'small wins' approach mentioned by Meyerson, coaching might be a useful strategy that an organization could utilise to foster 'small wins' with its senior women staff where large leaps have to be made. Coaching may also be a useful process during induction and during the first year of employment at a time when great changes are made. Often, for women, support can be lacking at these times as they experience further isolation and upheaval in both their working and family life.

Of particular relevance is the relationship of the senior woman with key change agents within the university structure. Locating such people can be difficult in the first few months of a new appointment. A program such as ATN-WEXDEV can enhance the possibility that pathways may cross and therefore support may well be available through many avenues, of which coaching can be one possibility.

Conclusion

In this paper we have evaluated the potential of coaching against the very real needs of a senior academic living through a process of re-location and adaptation. We have also related this case study to wider institutional concerns of strategic planning, in particular valuing staff, leadership and equity programs, thereby testing the rhetoric against everyday experience. This supports the objectives of the ATN-WEXDEV program and is also a contribution to the growing critical mass of research on women in higher education. In response to debates on globalization and managerialism within Universities, we emphasise the importance of learning. Finally, we stress that in a chillier climate there is ever more need to make sure that women are further represented, as that itself is a catalyst for change.

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