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## A School By Any Other Name...Is Still Just A Rock Band!

12 March 2014, by Assoc Prof Damien Harkin

How is your academic institution structured? If you work within a university, then no doubt you are familiar with the use of faculties or perhaps colleges. What about departments or schools? Whatever names or structures are employed, how would you describe the working relationship between academics and professional staff members?

As a research scientist and academic over the last twenty years, my appointments have almost always been made through academic departments or schools. In each case, the academic unit has been led by a senior academic manager, such as a chair or head, supported by a dedicated team of professional staff. More recently, however, I have had the opportunity of leading an academic discipline and the experience has led me to reflect more broadly about leadership styles and academic structures within the Australian higher education sector. The written record of this reflection was published last year in the Australian Universities Review (Harkin and Healy, 2013), but I'm pleased to be able to provide a brief synopsis here for the readership of Insights.

Over 40% of Australian universities have explored the use of disciplines as an alternative academic structure to more traditional departments or schools. While no pattern is apparent with respect to institutional age or historical origin, a clear trend is observed towards use of disciplines within faculties of science, engineering and medicine. While my analysis did not extend to an investigation of the underlying reasons behind this trend, cost is almost certainly a factor and especially in faculties of science, engineering and medicine, that are traditionally more expensive to operate. What interests me more though (and the prime focus for the paper published in AUR) is the type of leadership required to maintain an effective level of interaction between academics and professional staff following the transition to a discipline-based faculty.

During creation of the discipline that I led, all professional staff members (including technical staff responsible for setting up laboratory classes) were relocated operationally and often physically to a centralized faculty-led unit. While this level of change initially generated significant anxiety, all staff eventually adjusted to the new work environment and settled down to the business of conducting teaching and research. The separation of academics and professional staff, however, presented some interesting challenges, especially with respect to organizing existing undergraduate classes and designing new ones. It soon became apparent, therefore, that an effective mechanism for maintaining

communication between academics and professional staff would be required. What happened next was very interesting. Almost by default, academics within the discipline just continued to work with those professional staff members with whom they had relied upon previously. In doing so, it soon became apparent to us that we were developing a community of academic practice based upon the principles of distributed leadership.

I can't claim to be an expert on the topic of distributed leadership or indeed any other topic in management or leadership (my formal training is in science with a PhD in pathology). I can, however, report that the discipline I led responded well to the distributed leadership approach and this translated to measurable improvements in academic output that are reported in the AUR paper. The best analogy that I find useful in explaining the principles of distributed leadership is drawn from my younger days as a member of a local band in the northern suburbs of Adelaide.

For anyone who has ever been in a band or other form of musical group such as a choir or orchestra, you will immediately know how the overall quality of the performance is dependent upon every member taking responsibility for his or her role. In the case of the band that I joined (Ice on Fire), the drummer together with the bass guitar player worked closely to set and maintain the pace and rhythm of each song. Meanwhile, the keyboard player in conjunction with myself on lead guitar provided the basic melody and flourishes that would support and provide contrast to the lead singer. We all provided backing vocals. The overall job of leading each performance and communicating with the audience, however, generally resided with the lead singer. Our biggest gig was the Port Augusta football club's end of season celebration. It was a baptism of fire. Once the audience had had a few "lemonades" though we seemed to win the crowd over with a rendition of "Johnny B Goode". Not a bad effort given that only our drummer knew all the lyrics and I'm certainly no Chuck Berry!

Ok, so enough reminiscing. My point is that a similar relationship to that seen within a band or other musical group also exists when applying a distributed leadership model to an academic group. While the head of a department or discipline is responsible for leading the group, the ultimate performance is based upon respect for the distributed knowledge and skills of those serving in various roles. Thus, the technical and other professional staff are required to set and maintain the "rhythm" (where would we be without experts in time tabling!) while the academic staff often get to take "lead singer" roles out in front of classes and at society conferences presenting the results of their research work. And we shouldn't forget the essential roles provided by every other person working in the higher education

sector including the cleaners, facilities maintenance staff and security staff. They are all “with the band” and are therefore equally responsible for an institution’s overall performance.

In the two years since my return to the pool of managed academics, I have been actively engaged in a number of research initiatives with external partners and the principles of distributed leadership continue to serve me well. I’ve also developed a keen interest in the concept of leadership without authority. While it can often be a “tough gig”, I highly recommend the experience to anyone seeking to develop their understanding of authentic leadership, but this story (What would William Ryker do?, inspired by David Lloyd’s post last October) is best left for another day.

In the mean time, I’ll leave you with a question. If your institution, school or even discipline were to be a musical group, would everyone be playing in the same key and time signature, and if not, how would you remedy this?

## Reference

Harkin D.G. and Healy A.H. (2013) Redefining and leading the academic Discipline in Australian universities. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2): 80-92.