Understanding academic leadership using the four-frame model

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Introduction

Is your university a well-oiled machine or a factory where employees are considered resources in the production system, which can be engineered to produce the most efficient output under the plans and control of a hierarchical management? Or can your university be compared to a family, in which nurturing mothers and fathers try to ensure that everyone can use their personal strengths for the benefit of all? Or perhaps it can be likened to a jungle, in which different groups and alliances compete with each other to advance their own agenda and win the maximum amount of scarce resources? Or do the staff of your university, in a similar fashion to people in a temple, strive towards a greater purpose that is meaningful to everyone?

Bolman and Deal (1984; 1991; 2008) use these four metaphors—a machine, a family, a jungle and a temple—to illustrate four fundamentally different approaches to looking at organisations. They call these approaches frames, which are cognitive frameworks that help us direct our attention to what we consider important. They influence our perception of what we see, what we hear, how we distinguish problems, how we interpret events and what kind

of information we are willing to collect to support our thinking and pave the way for the actions we are about to take. However, frames also act as cognitive blinders, for while they help us see and hear certain issues, they also blind us from seeing and hearing other signs and opportunities.

In this chapter, the four-frame model and the concepts of reframing and multi-framing will be introduced. The review is based on Bolman and Deal's bestselling book *Reframing Organisations—Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, which was originally published in 1984 as *Modern Approaches to Understanding and Managing Organisations* and is now in its fifth edition.

Following an introduction of the main concepts of Bolman and Deal's model, a short overview of the research and the critique on the four-frame model will be provided. A reader interested in the original references for this research can consult Bolman (2017) or Vuori (2011, 81–90). The conclusion section evaluates the merits and challenges of utilising the four-frame model in the study of academic leadership.

The four frames

To help readers capture the essence of the concept of frame, Bolman and Deal (1984; 1991; 2008) offer many synonyms, referring to them as *windows*, *filters*, *prisms*, *perspectives*, *orientations*, *mindshapes* and *lenses*. According to Bolman and Deal, frames are key to understanding leadership because frames direct what leaders think and how they will behave. Bolman and Deal describe four distinct leadership frames: structural, human resource, political and symbolic.

The structural frame approaches an organisation as a hierarchical system operating with a predetermined chain of command, well-established rules, procedures, and processes. Central concepts of the structural frame involve prioritising, rules, policies, goals, roles, technology, environment and orderly decisions. The main leadership tasks within the structural frame include ensuring that goals are reached, results are obtained and that the organisational structure is attuned to accomplishing tasks. Moreover, a leader with this frame focuses on efficiency, planning, control and decision-making. Seeing the

organisation through the metaphor of a machine symbolises this leadership frame.

The human resource frame echoes a leadership orientation which holds that human and organisational needs should be aligned to get results. The strategy to make change is created through collective action. Leaders who use this frame attempt to encourage staff to participate in decision-making. Moreover, a leader using this frame is willing to invest time and effort on employee needs, motivating and helping them reach their goals. Key concepts within this leadership frame include building consensus, solving problems, teams, needs, skills, relationships, loyalty and commitment. Seeing the organisation through the metaphor of a family symbolises this leadership orientation.

The political frame differs from the orientations described above, as the concepts of power, conflict, competition and organisational politics are placed front and centre. In this frame, organisations are seen as consisting of competing groups that manoeuvre with the aim of gaining power to control the allocation of scarce resources. A leader within this frame tries to advance her or his own agenda by building constantly changing coalitions. Through bargaining, negotiating, influencing and analysing competing groups' strategies and stakeholder moves, a leader using this frame tries to advance her or his interests. The metaphor of a jungle illustrates the orientation of a leader with a political-frame approach to the organisation.

A leader with a symbolic frame perceives the organisation as a cultural system of shared meanings. It is the leader's job to act as a catalyst or facilitator to build and maintain a culture based on shared meanings. By bonding people through organisational culture and using stories, artefacts, rituals and ceremonies, the leader within this frame tries to direct the proceedings on a path that leads to the organisational vision. Central concepts within this frame include meaning, culture, rituals, stories and heroes. Therefore, the metaphor that is congruent with this leadership frame is a temple.

Bolman and Deal (1984) reveal that they came up with the model while planning a course on organisational theory for Harvard University and decided to incorporate different schools of organisational theory into a coherent theory

that would satisfy them both. Thus, the structural frame in Bolman and Deal's model incorporates the ideas of rationalist systems theories. Conversely, the human resource frame builds on the ideas of the human research school of organisational theory, while the political frame reflects the ideas posited by the political school of organisational theory. The symbolic school of organisational theory, particularly the work of Cohen and March (1974), constitutes the basis of Bolman and Deal's definition of the symbolic leadership frame.

Therefore, rather than regarding the four-frame model as a theory, it should be considered an incorporation of central schools of organisational thought. Bolman and Deal also acknowledge the influence of Morgan's (1986) *Images of Organisation* and Goffman's (1986) *Frame Analysis* in their thinking. However, the work of Bolman and Deal (1984) has had a profound impact on two classic books on higher education: Birnbaum's (1988) *How Colleges Work* and Bergquist's (1992) *The Four Cultures of the Academy* (for a comparison of these three, see Vuori 2011, 72–81). Moreover, Bolman and Gallos (2011) wrote the book *Reframing Academic Leadership*, in which they discuss the application of the four-frame model in a higher education context.

Frames direct what leaders see

Bolman and Deal (1984; 1991; 2008) argue that frames influence leaders' decisions regarding which organisational behaviours to focus on, which questions to raise, which alternatives to consider, what is perceived to be a problem and what courses of action should be taken to solve that problem. Frames influence, for example, how a leader approaches an employee whose work has gone downhill lately. A leader with a structural frame might regard this as employee underachievement and, through this frame, try to solve the problem by setting more pronounced performance targets and accelerating the reporting and control cycles. Conversely, a leader with a human resource frame might perceive the issue as a motivational problem and attempt to increase time spent with the employee to discuss her or his personal issues and aspirations. A leader with a political frame might interpret the situation as a sign of the

employee having a hidden agenda and possibly advancing competing interests. Therefore, the politically-oriented leader might be willing to analyse possible scenarios, weigh how important the input of the employee should be and make decisions to move, or not, based on that analysis. A leader with a symbolic frame, instead, might be prone to seeking ways to highlight the purpose and meaning of the employee's and organisation's work.

Thus, for example, depending on the frame, a leader in an academic organisation might react in very different ways to student complaints about a lecturer's teaching quality. A leader with a structural frame might undertake actions to see whether the curriculum has been adhered to; a leader with a human resource frame might encourage teaching in teams; a leader with a political frame might have the courage to wait patiently; and a leader with a symbolic frame could, for example, arrange an event at which alumni speak about the value of the education they obtained from that institution.

Reframing and multi-framing to avoid freezing

According to Bolman and Deal (1984; 1991; 2008), frames, while directing the attention of leaders to certain signals in the organisation, can also box in leaders so that they end up responding only in ways that are congruent with their chosen frames. Leaders wind up shaping situations to fit their orientations, even when the approach does not work, leaving them stuck with a limited solution kit to handle emerging problems. To avoid this kind of freezing of the mind, Bolman and Deal suggest that leaders practice breaking away from their existing frames and try to see their organisations through a different kind of lens. **Reframing** refers to the leader's ability to shift between different frames, whereas **multi-framing** in Bolman and Deal's vocabulary means a leader's competence in using different frames simultaneously. They suggest that multi-framing makes leadership more effective because it allows leaders to detect more signals in their environment, provide a variety of interpretations to complex events and choose between different alternatives in their problem-solving kit. They further suggest that through multi-framing, leaders are better-equipped

to balance the often-conflicting and complex demands of different interest groups in the organisation's internal and external environments.

When multi-framing, a leader accepts the view that organisations are ambiguous—full of conflicts and colliding interests—acknowledging that most organisational problems are ill-defined and that several solutions are available. When multi-framing, a leader takes the view that most often, management control of events and actions is an illusion, yet decisions must be made (Bolman & Deal 2008).

With the four-frame model, Bolman and Deal also take a stand on a long-running debate over where management and leadership begin and end. While the traditional division separates management from leadership by distinguishing between the concern for tasks and the concern for people, Bolman and Deal (1991) argue that managerial effectiveness refers to the use of structural and human resource frames, whereas leadership effectiveness depends on the use of political and symbolic frames. Both are needed, so the ability to use all four frames is a sign of an effective leader, particularly when leading change.

Research using the four-frame model

Bolman and Deal's four-frame model has been used to study leadership in a variety of contexts. In addition to studies in higher education leadership (e.g. Bensimon 1989; Kezar, Eckel, Contreras-McGavin & Quaye 2008; McArdle 2013), it has been applied in the field of school management (e.g. Hellsten, Noonan, Preston & Prytula 2013; Thompson 2000), and within non-profit (Heimovics, Herman & Jurkiewicz Coughlin 1993; 1995) and business organisations (Bolman & Deal 1991; Seyal, Yussof, Mohammad & Rahman 2012). To explore whether leaders in the research samples can reframe and multi-frame, i.e. use one, two, three or four different leadership frames, both quantitative (e.g. Mosser & Walls 2002; Turley, 2004) and qualitative research methods (e.g. Heimovics et al. 1993; Tan, Fatt Hee & Yan Piaw 2015) have been applied. Research designs have also included settings in which researchers have

combined the leaders' self-evaluation of their frame usage with the assessment of the frame use, as perceived by the leaders' colleagues or subordinates (e.g. Scott 1999), as well as settings in which research combines qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. McArdle 2013).

Bolman and Deal (1991) themselves have conducted cross-sectional studies using their four-frame model and have concluded that in a higher education context, multi-framing seems to be essential, whereas in their comparison group of companies, managerial effectiveness was primarily connected with the use of structural frames. Moreover, in this research, Bolman and Deal have shown that contrary to the beliefs of many management-development professionals, the political frame in all samples was a better predictor of leadership effectiveness than the human resource frame.

Other research within higher education has been conducted among college presidents, university athletic directors, department chairs and programme directors of different disciplines and professional fields (Vuori 2011, 81–88). The lion's share of these studies involved dissertations for PhD or EdD degrees at US universities, which primarily used survey instruments, while qualitative exploration of frame usage by academic leaders has been less common.

Critique

The research that builds on the four-frame model belongs to the constructivist paradigm of leadership research, which holds significantly different assumptions on leadership research than the positivist paradigm. Positivism aims to discover universal truths that can be generalised so that predictions can be made based on research findings. Positivist leadership researchers study, for example, the leadership traits and behaviours that effective leaders possess and exhibit. Constructivist research rejects the search for universal truths and builds on assumptions that reality is constructed through individual interpretations. Constructivist leadership research sees leadership as a social construct that emerges through interaction and people's own meaning-creating processes. One stream of constructivist leadership research focuses on leaders'

cognitive processes, while a sub-stream—in which four-frame research situates itself within this research approach—concentrates on the mental models of leaders and followers.

Thus, the critique posed against the application of Bolman and Deal's four-frame research should be posed within a constructivist paradigm, inquiring into whether the model can provide insight into the mental processes of leaders. In particular, in a higher education setting, can the model guide a researcher towards discovering something profound in the context of academic organisation and leadership?

The criticism of Bolman and Deal's model first expresses a very valid concern over whether the route from a leader's thoughts to actions is as simple as the model presumes, or whether this is just evangelist, wishful thinking. Alternatively, might it be that the organisation-specific practices and procedures, in fact, narrow the choice of leaders' mental maps and alternatives regarding possible actions? A second point of criticism that has been raised is whether the leadership frames can be voluntarily chosen and learned, and if so, whether multi-framing would lead to thinking that is overly complex. A third point of concern has been whether the four frames suggested by Bolman and Deal represent male-dominant leadership thinking and suppress the female voice in leadership (see review of the critique in Vuori 2011, 88–90).

Research has contradicted the second and third points of criticism by showing that even after two years, participants who were trained to use the four frames and became acquainted with the concepts of reframing and multi-framing were of the opinion that they had a positive effect on their leadership (Dunford & Palmer 1995). Furthermore, research has found no differences between the male and female uses of frames (Bolman & Deal 1991; Thompson 2000). However, the first point of criticism on questioning whether the thinking of a leader affects the actions that will be undertaken is a critical-concern issue on which each researcher using the four-frame model needs to take a stand.

Bolman and Deal's own answer to this challenge involved developing a survey instrument that combined a leader's self-assessment with a survey of

the leader's followers or colleagues so that they could provide evidence of the leader's performance. Another option, and perhaps one that is more congruent with the constructivist paradigm, is to approach the dualism of managerial thought and action in the light of Weick's (1995) ideas about sensemaking as an effort to connect beliefs and actions. Weick argues that beliefs and actions are intertwined: "To believe is to initiate actions capable of lending substance to the belief" (p. 134; see also Birnbaum 1988).

Therefore, if a constructivist-oriented researcher of academia aims to study the sensemaking of academic leaders, Bolman and Deal's four-frame model might be of use, particularly if one abandons the survey instrument and applies qualitative research methods to concentrate on listening in order to discover how the informants themselves find meaning in their work, as opposed to the survey instrument, in which respondents are forced to choose from pre-defined categories.

Conclusions

Despite having been introduced as early as 1984, the four-model paradigm has the potential to shed light on the complexities of challenges in higher education organisations. With its structural and human resource frames, the model poignantly covers the two sides of the global management script (Meyer 2002; Vuori 2015), which refers to shared ideas about management and organisations that travel around the world and result in the creation of similar management structures in both the private and public sectors—higher education being no exception. The global management script defines what legitimate managers do in efficient organisations and emphasises both rational management and employee empowerment.

The structural frame illustrates the mental map of a leader who is surrounded by the overtly rational, managerialist ethos of making higher education more efficient and more accountable through management. It places managers in the roles of rational agents who aim to control uncertainties in their environment. These managerialist-driven tendencies to create corporate-

like management practices have hit some higher education systems and sectors harder than others. For example, it is difficult to imagine such managers at Finnish universities of applied sciences, who would not have encountered these pressures, nor needed to act on them. The structural frame legitimises their search for increased rationality, with more developed ways to attack irrationality in their environment (Vuori 2011).

In addition to echoing the need for rational management, the standardised script for modern management sets demands for management to empower employees. Organisations are expected to engage their employees and encourage them to participate in organisational affairs. This quest for a more employee-driven, collegial culture may co-exist, even in higher education organisations that are run with overtly managerialist principles and that have no history of shared governance (Vuori 2015). Bolman and Deal's human resource frame captures the essence of this quest. Moreover, the concept of reframing helps in understanding that both managerialism and collegialism may exist in parallel in a modern university and that an academic leader must have the competence to shift back and forth between the use of structural and human resource frames to survive the conflicting demands set by both.

However, in its complexity, an academic organisation has characteristics that are not so evident in other organisations. The political and symbolic leadership frames provide openings for understanding the work of an academic manager in the loosely coupled, yet mission-driven higher education organisation. For this reason, the four-frame model and the multi-framing concept have the potential to provide insights for a constructivist-oriented leadership researcher who aims to make sense of the many undercurrents, complexities and ambiguities of an academic organisation.

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