

One Year In: Reflections of a New Academic Manager

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written about the importance of reflection for teachers' professional development, there is little in the way of academic management reflection in the TESOL industry. In an attempt to reverse this trend, this paper draws on the reflections of a new academic manager to discuss challenges faced in the first twelve months and to explore how this experience has redefined certain management beliefs, particularly with regard to communication and teamwork. The paper concludes with the hope that these reflections will help inform future academic management training, and provide a useful insight into the challenges facing academic managers for those who aspire to move into positions of responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

A little under twelve months ago I joined the English for Discussion Center (EDC) at Rikkyo University as a Program Manager (PM), which involves working together with the three other PMs to maintain and develop the program's unified curriculum. The main responsibilities of this role include defining assessment criteria and ensuring interrater reliability, editing and writing the course textbook, and managing the training and development of all teachers, such as delivering instructor training sessions and carrying out instructor observations. While none of the responsibilities at EDC were unfamiliar to me due to my having had similar responsibilities in previous roles, with a new context to understand, new procedures to learn, and new professional relationships to develop, it was clear to me upon becoming a PM that there would be a steep learning curve involved.

Much has been written about the importance of reflection for teachers' professional development, yet I was surprised to discover very little in the way of precedent when it comes to management reflections, particularly in the realm of TESOL, despite concerns regarding the lack of critical perspective in manager development (Miller, 2012; Reynolds, 1998). In an attempt to reverse this trend, this paper stems from a desire to personally reflect on my first year as a PM and provide others with an insight into the challenges that new academic managers can face. As such, I intend to begin with a discussion of some challenges I faced upon joining EDC before outlining how my beliefs about management have changed, developed, or been strengthened during my first year as an academic manager.

DISCUSSION

Challenges

Overall, I feel I have settled in well to the new context and I am now fairly comfortable with the main principles and workings of EDC. However, much as I have found in previous learning experiences, I felt that I got worse before I got better, becoming acutely aware of my weaknesses before I managed to overcome them. This is, however, a key factor in adult learning as I have been challenged to re-examine my own beliefs and practices (Gallup Rodriguez & McKay, 2010) and push myself to the edge of my competence, "where learning occurs" (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993, p. i).

The biggest challenge I felt this year stemmed from going from being one of the most knowledgeable and capable authorities in my context to becoming completely reliant on other people. Hill (2007) mentions this as an issue for many new managers, who are required to "unlearn a mind-set and habits that have served [them] well" (p. 3) in the past and relearn new procedures.

For me, I felt this change had a direct impact on my professional behaviour and identity, a change also evidenced by Ibarra (1999), and was particularly evident in my first semester when I was very conscious that I was participating less actively in discussions than I previously would have. When I did participate, I felt much less decisive and self-assured than I was accustomed to; as I noted during my second month, “I feel like I’m hedging my words a lot more [than I usually do] and am looking for reinforcement from other PMs... checking if they agree.” This was likely the result of both a lack of informed opinion, given that I was often comparatively unfamiliar with procedures and the wider context, and a lack of confidence (Hay, 2014). This had wider implications than merely taking a more passive role in decision-making and occasionally directly affected my communicative ability; as I acknowledged in my third month, “I feel so tongue-tied at times... I have rarely felt so inarticulate.” Since then, I do feel that this has become less of an issue, although it remains an aim of mine for my second year to establish my own voice and to make myself heard during discussions.

This initial feeling of helplessness was compounded by my desire to make an immediate good impression and demonstrate why I had been hired for the role. Despite being a well-qualified and experienced teacher and having spent a number of years in roles of responsibility, this was particularly difficult as I was moving to a very narrow context where much of my experience, while standing me in good stead, could be put to very little immediate practical use. I was also very conscious that all existing teachers and PMs had a better knowledge of the curriculum than I did. Indeed, after four weeks, I noted that “even teachers who started at the same time as me already have three times more experience teaching EDC lessons than I have”, which may have threatened my position with regard to providing feedback on classroom practices. I was also particularly aware that a number of current EDC teachers had applied for the PM role and I was initially concerned that this could be a potential issue. It appeared obvious to me that those who move from a teaching position to a management role within the same context arguably face a less steep learning curve than someone from outside the program, and it would be understandable for them to be judging me and my performance carefully. From my reflections in my first month, I was certainly worried that this may lead to some bitterness or resentment - something I have witnessed first-hand in the past - although I am relieved to state that these fears were unfounded. I did, however, crave positive reinforcement from both fellow PMs and EDC teachers, writing in my third month reflections that although “I can feel I’m progressing, I wish I knew how others felt I was doing” and asking, after six months “is this [my performance] what people expected?” and wondering “how have other PMs fared in this settling in period?” Even after almost a full year in the role, I was still showing a desire to “get some sort of feedback from everyone on what I’ve done well, and what I can do better.” I am still extremely keen to garner feedback from those who work closely with me, although I must also admit an acute sense of nerves when I consider how they may respond.

It is evident from reading my reflections that I was very conscious of other people’s perceptions of me, perhaps with good reason given that every statement and nonverbal gesture from new managers tend to be analysed for insights into their character (Hill, 2007, p. 6). Perhaps as a result, I reflected in my first month that, “I’m not sure where I fit in yet” and that I felt my place was neither with the other PMs, whose position of authority I shared through job title alone, nor with the eleven new teachers, with whom I spent the first week of orientation, yet who soon became busy with their teaching commitments and integrated with existing teachers much more quickly than I did. In contrast, I felt my place was “somewhere between the two groups” and I noted that “even some teachers seem[ed] unsure as to how to deal with, or even talk to, me - am I their boss, or am I a newbie?”

It was therefore paramount that I got to know all of my colleagues quickly in order to develop personal and professional relationships not only to establish a sense of credibility and competence (Hill, 2007), but also as it is a major source of job satisfaction and personal motivation for me; indeed, a key factor in my enjoyment of my new role has come from my interactions with fellow PMs, teachers, and administration staff. One barrier to the building of these relationships is the layout of the department, with the 43 teachers split into four separate team rooms, each managed by a different PM. However, as PMs are required to work together closely, the majority of our time is spent in a separate office. While I felt that I formed good working relationships with teachers in my team room during the first semester, I also felt reluctant to leave the PM office at times as my understanding of my own role relied heavily on listening to, and learning from, the other PMs. In my second semester, in contrast, I felt more confident in being able to leave the PM office and interact with all teachers without the worry that I may be missing useful management discussions.

It is a significant concern of new managers that managers are expected to be all-knowing beings (Hay, 2014; Parker, 2004), yet this is clearly an unrealistic expectation, and from early in my EDC career I endeavoured to “embrace my vulnerability” (Tjan, 2017) and be open and honest about the limitations to my knowledge in all interactions. This lack of knowledge is something that can only really be solved with time and experience; even after one year I reflected that “there’s still a difference between knowing the program as I do and having the depth of background knowledge of the program that the other PMs do.” Yet, if there are limits to what a new manager can do immediately, what *can* be expected from someone new to the position? In comparing my approach at EDC with that in previous roles, it is clear there are two main differences, largely due to these gaps in my contextual knowledge. Firstly, I have made a conscious effort to listen more carefully to others when talking, which has been noticed and complimented by a number of my colleagues. Secondly, I have ensured I ask questions when I am unsure. The benefit of asking questions is two-fold in that it both helps me “scramble up a new learning curve” yet still adds value to my role as it challenges others to consider whether the current way of doing things is still the most effective (Wiseman, 2015). After three months, I reflected that this approach seemed to be “go[ing] a long way” towards helping build relationships with teachers, administrative staff, and my fellow managers. In the long-term, I sincerely hope that this experience will form a key part of my identity as a manager: to be a better listener, and to question current methods more regularly.

The points outlined above led, at times, to occasional feelings of inadequacy and frustration at not feeling or appearing able to do my job to the best of my abilities, such as contributing to management discussions or dealing with teachers’ queries as quickly and effectively as I would have liked. I have no doubt, however, that this will improve with time, and it is clearly not something that can be learned immediately but rather is picked up gradually through experience and longer-term knowledge. Reading through my reflections on my first year as a PM, I have noticed clear signs of progress and my second semester brought with it a noticeable growth in my confidence as I noticed that colleagues began to come specifically to me for support and advice; as I wrote at the time, “I love that I am in a position to help people, and more importantly that others view me as being in this position; this is what I came here to do.”

This first year as a PM has also had an impact on a number of my management beliefs, strengthening many and encouraging me to reconsider others. These beliefs will be briefly outlined in the section that follows.

Management Beliefs

I have always been a firm believer in the importance of communication and there is no doubt in my mind that problems arise when communication breaks down. This belief has only been strengthened over the past year, through numerous examples where communication between teachers and PMs has averted potential issues and two incidents which, with hindsight, could have been avoided through better communication from all parties. A key factor in communication with management is approachability, which can be fostered in a number of ways including making time for others, and listening to what they have to say, as well as through an informal approach to communication (Daft, 2010; Pratt, 2012). This last factor is another belief of mine that has been strengthened, particularly through one incident in the last year where a formal approach was received negatively by a number of people. As Pratt (2012) argues, “you can be friendly and human without compromising your authority” (p. 147) and indeed I feel it could arguably strengthen credibility in subordinates’ eyes if there is more of an interpersonal approach.

Interpersonal skills are also vital for teamwork and, although I have always been a believer in the benefits of working as a team, in previous roles I have, at times, witnessed decisions made in the name of a team being driven by individual agendas - a common issue in collegial decision-making according to Hellawell & Hancock (2010) - which had weakened my faith in the effectiveness of teamwork. However, my beliefs have been reaffirmed through my positive experiences as a PM at EDC. In comparing this experience with my previous negative experience, I feel the major difference is the clear definition of roles and expectations within the team, without which individuals can “find themselves hemmed in by inter-dependencies. Instead of feeling free, they feel constrained, especially if they were accustomed to the relative independence of a star performer” (Hill, 2002, p. 4).

A key tenet to effective teamwork is having well-defined responsibilities and expectations. In many of my previous working contexts, certain grey areas existed between roles, such as teachers running training workshops for their less experienced peers or becoming involved in materials development. While many teachers relished the opportunity to gain further experience in such areas, it also occasionally led to conflicts of interest, accusations of favouritism, and a lower quality of final outcomes. In contrast to this, roles at EDC are comparatively well defined with teachers responsible for delivering the majority of the lessons and PMs responsible for managing the curriculum. While this may impose certain limitations on individual development, it removes the risks outlined above and ensures all parties are clear on their own responsibilities. When I compare the two experiences and the success of the respective teaching centres, I am convinced that the approach taken at EDC is the optimal method for ensuring success within a team.

CONCLUSION

The initial period as an academic manager is often “a tale of disorientation and overwhelming confusion” (Hill, 2007, p. 2) and if learning is a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38), it is helpful to pause and make sense of these experiences, and reflect upon what has gone well and what can perhaps be done better (Reynolds, 1998). This is particularly true given that many managers are unaware of their own gradual progress (Hill, 2007), which only increases the need for reflection as a tool in management training and development.

Challenges I have faced included a perception - or perhaps an awareness - that my performance and behaviour were the subject of discussion among teachers, a lack of self-confidence, and the frustration that comes with a lack of knowledge of the local context. However, while new academic managers cannot expect, nor be expected, to instantly acquire in-depth

knowledge of their new context, there are fewer immediate barriers to the developing of successful working relationships. I believe that my overall successful adaptation to the EDC context is largely due to relationships forged with my new colleagues through regular communication. This has been aided by my attempts to be approachable at all times, being willing to listen to others, and being open and frank about my own shortcomings and limitations.

Initially I had some reservations about writing this reflection paper and, given the dearth of precedents, it appears many others have also had misgivings. This could be explained by the perception that reflections involve public criticism of performance for individuals who are not accustomed to having their authority questioned (Reynolds, 1998); yet, if managers are to encourage teachers to reflect on their performance, they must surely also be expected an ability to identify their own weaknesses and work towards improvement.

In writing this paper, I feel I have been able to illuminate my own experiences of becoming an academic manager in a new context, the difficulties I have faced, and the progress I have made. I am hopeful that this account will inform future EDC PM training (particularly with regard to feedback on progress made), and provide a useful insight into the challenges facing academic managers for those who aspire to move into positions of responsibility.

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