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Leadership for Sustainability: A Case Study of a University Research Center

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Abstract

Research centers provide benefits to an institution, but they struggle with funding. This paper presents how leaders and boards guide a center through funding loss and acquiring new funding.
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Research Centers

For several decades, research has been a crucial aspect of higher education systems (Sá, 2008). So much so that universities are classified by their research focus and productivity (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The most recent decades have seen research not only done with faculty individually but also through avenues such as research centers (Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; McCarthy & Hall, 1989). Today, research centers are essential in higher education and can be found in virtually every field, from science to education (Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; McCarthy & Hall, 1989). In 2011, Hall referenced 17,000 research centers within Canada and the United States, and some larger universities have 60 to 200 research centers on their campus (Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; Hays, 1991).

No unifying definition of a research center exists in literature; however, research centers often share similar characteristics. Bozeman and Boardman (2003) defined a research center as a "formal organizational entity within a university that exists chiefly to serve a research mission, is set apart from the departmental organization, and includes researchers from more than one department (or line management unit)" (p. 17). All research centers share the mission and focus of research (Hall, 2011; Stahler & Tash, 1994), and many of them also share the characteristic of collaboration with research or interdisciplinary research (Boardman & Corley, 2008). However, there are differences in the funding, degree of incorporation within the university, the magnitude of outside support, distribution of faculty to professional research staff, and others (Hall, 2011; Stahler & Tash, 1994). These characteristics look different at each research center depending, in part, on the type of research center (Stahler & Tash, 1994).

Literature generally identifies research centers according to three types: standard centers, adaptive centers, and shadow centers (Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972). Standard centers are the most holistically stable centers with the largest number of employees (Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972; Hall, 2011). These centers are stable in their funding and mission and are more likely to have boards that provide advice and guidance. Adaptive centers are less stable than standard centers, have a smaller number of employees, and often must redefine or re-envision their mission and goals to adapt to new funding sources (Hall, 2011; Hays, 1991; Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972). They have more dependence on financial resources such as grants for survival (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Finally, shadow centers are the least stable and typically operate solely off of the founding faculty member's work or, in some cases, with one to two other employees (Hall, 2011; Hays, 1991; Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972). Shadow centers have no physical location and, as a result, are often labeled as "paper centers" because they often are

operated out of a faculty member's filing cabinet (Hall, 2011, p. 30). This type of center has a very minimal budget (Hall, 2011; Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972).

According to Stahler and Tash (1994), research centers are a "necessary organizational structure for bolstering a university's sponsored research program and for encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration" (p. 552). The literature demonstrates the significance of research centers within higher education. Centers contribute through revenue generation (Hall, 2011; Stahler & Tash, 1994), interdisciplinary collaboration (Boardman & Corley, 2008; Hays, 1991; Stahler & Tash, 1994), faculty benefits (Sabharwal & Hu, 2013), and prestige (Hall, 2011; Matkin, 1997; Stahler & Tash, 1994). These stated benefits of research centers contribute to the continued research and sustainability of research centers.

Leadership and Boards of Research Centers

Research centers typically thrive or fail based on the leadership of the director (Stahler & Tash, 1994). They are reflections of the director and the director's interests and goals (Hays, 1991; Stahler & Tash, 1994). Glied et al. (2007) wrote, "In the case of a center, leadership and existence are intertwined" (p. 35), and Hall (2005) stated, "centers need an entrepreneurial champion with vision and passion for their purpose" (p. 33). Bozeman and Boardman (2003) described a center director as the individual to whom the researchers or principal investigators report; however, principal investigators can also serve as center directors, which is more common in smaller centers with fewer staff members. In addition to the center director, a more massive center could have a leadership team for which leaders are responsible for specific center services or areas.

The demands of directing a center can be time-consuming and challenging (Glied et al., 2007). Boardman and Ponomariov (2014) claimed that centers are "as known for their management challenges as for their productivity" (p. 76). These challenges include role strain (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007), center mission and purpose (Stahler & Tash, 1994), the relationship with the academic department and university (Sá, 2008), the management of staff (Boardman & Bozeman, 2003; Hays, 1991), and funding (Glied et al., 2007; Hall, 2011; McCarthy & Hall, 1989; Sá, 2008; Stahler & Tash, 1994). However, funding issues were rated the number one by directors, cause for closures of centers, even stating "it can make or break a center" (Hall, 2011, p. 35).

Within research center literature, boards are discussed very briefly and mainly from the perspective of grant-mandated boards, not boards of research centers (Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972; McCarthy & Hall, 1989). However, boards and their advice can impact leadership and organizational success (Dyer & Williams, 1991), as well as secure financial resources (Dyer & Williams, 1991). Advisory boards are typically the type of board a research center would have. These boards "offers advice to an individual, group, or body responsible for programs or management of an organization" (Dyer & Williams, 1991, p. 1). Board members might be charged with policymaking, organizing the community around the organization's activities, improving public relations, assisting in evaluating programs, fundraising, and advocating on behalf of the organization (Dyer & Williams, 1991).

Theoretical Framework

This study used the lens of shared transformational leadership, the combined theories of transformational and shared leadership. Shared transformational leadership applies to research centers because both shared and transformational leaderships have been connected to

organizations similar to that of a research center (Avolio, 2011). Shared transformational leadership can also impact team performance, influencing financial performance. There is the potential for shared leadership to positively influence a research center's funding through leadership's shared decision-making to commit to the shared purpose and mission of the center.

Methods

This single, historical, interpretive case study focused on one research center that had experienced funding uncertainty during its 20 years of existence. A case study design allows for an in-depth analysis of leadership and boards leading research centers during financial uncertainty. Binding the case specifically to one research center advances an understanding of this topic (Merriam, 2007). One research center was chosen for this study based on the characteristics of an adaptive research center (Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972). The study was also bounded by time in that data collection was initially limited to the first ten years of the center; however, based on preliminary discussions with the center gatekeeper, the study was extended to the first 20 years. Participants were leaders or board members for Center A. Two interviews with 10 participants covered leadership roles, board roles, leadership and boards, and finances. Observations of a board meeting and staff meetings were conducted, and documents such as emails, flyers and brochures, mission statements, bylaws, meeting agendas and minutes, and organizational charts were collected for analysis. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data analysis included open and axial coding and constant comparative analysis. This study addresses the following four research questions:

1. What leadership style does leaders of research centers exhibit?
2. How do leaders transform their research center through organizational performance?
3. How does the board reduce leaderships' dependence on resources for research center survival?
4. How does the board assist in securing new funding for center survival?

Findings

Leadership Style of Leaders of Research Center

The leadership team as a whole exhibited transformational attributes. The leadership team transforms Center A through this and the shared leadership conditions of shared purpose, social support, and voice. Although Center A has one director at a time, the director does not make decisions solely. When asked to describe their leadership style, all six of the leaders described their style by either stating "shared leadership" or using critical phrases associated with shared leadership such as "collaborative," work "beside them," or "having discussions." Not every leader exhibited every Four I attribute; many leaders were higher in one attribute than another.

Idealized Influence

Examples of idealized influence primarily focused on the leader's high standards, clear mission and vision, skills, and a follower's admiration for or desire to emulate the leader. The most significant portion of idealized influence examples was admirable or desirable skills that the leaders possessed. These examples were primarily about the founding director and painted an image of a charismatic leader. In an example of making difficult decisions amid financial challenges within the university, the current director was said to have "gumption...to support that (decision)." Some of these skills led participants to begin to emulate the founding director.

Inspirational Motivation

For all leaders except one, inspirational motivation was their highest self-reported transformational behavior. Inspirational motivation was primarily described as a commitment to Center A's vision and team spirit. Team spirit was also referenced in connection with the Center's vision. Participant J explained her process of accomplishing a vision, "I like to talk to people around me both above, beside, and below me …."

Intellectual Stimulation

Each participant described himself or herself with examples that support intellectual stimulation, except for one participant. Many examples illustrate each leader's effort to include employees' voices in the challenging work of the Center. Leaders also voiced their support for employee creativity and innovation in the work. During the development of this program, the founding director asked participants and other followers, "What do you think?" By asking this question, employees were allowed to think of solutions themselves.

Individual Considerations

All of the participants described examples of how he or she exhibits individual consideration for followers. Most examples related to how leaders interacted with followers during financial uncertainty and potential position eliminations. Leaders demonstrated that when that situation arises, they must think of each follower individually and help coach or advise them toward what would be best for the follower.

Leaders Transforming Their Organization

Organizational performance in this study is referred to as financial performance. Throughout the history of Center A, the center has experienced financial challenges but has successfully secured new funding for the center's survival. Despite Center A's apparent financial success, there were periods of financial uncertainty, which all except one leader recounted. Center leadership transformed the center through shared transformational leadership; however, leaders also used other structures to transform the organization. These include meeting structures, anticipating new funding, and consulting and collaborating with experts and outside stakeholders. The leadership team had weekly meetings to discuss the current state of the center and its financial standing. They also were always anticipating the need for new funding, and such a need was never a surprise. Finally, leadership used relationships with experts and stakeholders to help secure or locate revenue sources for new funding.

Board Reducing Dependence on Resources

Based on data collection, including interviews, it is evident that funding and the university are two of the largest sources of resource dependency for a research center. Dependence on either one of these can never entirely be eliminated. For the board to act as a catalyst to eliminate Center A's dependence on these resources, specifically the university, would be very unlikely and most likely unadvised; however, the board can be critical in the center's navigation of this resource dependency. The board members do so through their board membership, external perspective, and advocacy among their connections. The background and expertise of board members, individually and collectively, are vital toward cohesion and promoting the center's mission. A board with diversity in this manner can have far-reaching effects on their connections. Additionally, they have their own expertise that can contribute to them, providing an external perspective.

Board Assisting in New Funding

Due to the established roles and responsibilities, the board had limited involvement and influence in the daily operations and funding of the center. The board had no authority over

which grants were applied for or leadership expenditures. Participant I shared, "I don't know about the finances. I never got into that." While board members may not have been involved with finances in a hands-on way, they were kept informed of the financial state of the Center. Participant H shared that board members were "well informed" of financial status through discussions at meetings. Board member participants shared different beliefs about whether the Center would have secured funding without the help of the board. Some believed the board to be integral to helping with some financial issues, while others felt it was hard to make a definitive statement. This study found that although the board was not vital for securing new funding, they could play a part in helping and assisting leadership. The board serves as a think tank, utilizes connections, and contributes personal finances.

Discussion

This study is relevant to the field of adult education first in that there are numerous education research centers across universities that seek to bridge the gap between academia and industry. These centers provide adult learning opportunities to stakeholders that will ultimately impact the industry. However, to continue this impact on the industry, the center must continue to exit. Thus, the leadership and boards of these centers are crucial in the sustainability of the center and in continuing the center's mission. Furthermore, these centers, depending on the size, are spaces in which informal learning is constantly occurring as employees and scholars are researching and discovering new findings in their field.

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