Finding a Balance: Schrödinger’s Leadership in a Time of Chaos

Dr Peter Wolstencroft – Subject Leader, Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Rob Kivits – Associate Head of School, Coventry University

Dr Leanne de Main – Associate Dean, De Montfort University

*They control everything, how fast you work, when you work, even when you go to the bathroom, everything* (Beynon, 1975)

This quote comes from an exploration into leadership within the automotive industry, the reality of life in a car factory at this time was a leadership style that stressed one way communication and an approach that placed all power firmly with those at the top of the hierarchy. Those working below the level of manager had one job and that was to follow orders; deviations or any form of freethinking was not permitted; instead, micro-management stopped anybody deviating from the overall plan.

Leading others during a period of instability and everchanging parameters demands a more dynamic and heterogenic style of leadership. On one-hand, there is a requirement to have an element of control to steer the direction of the organisation in line with guidelines set by external agencies. Yet, on the other hand, staff need the space and flexibility to cope with the pace of change without additional pressure and stress from ‘the top’. To empower and engage staff, there needs to be a culture of trust and delegated responsibility. In the current, turbulent environment, that the education sector finds itself in, the search for a form of leadership that meets these challenges is of vital importance. In this blog we look at how we find a balance as leaders.

Despite the rise of a compliance culture ethos in education and the omnipresence of metrics within the sector, few academics would argue that Beynon’s described leadership is either present, or even possible, in most of higher education, despite any benefits it might bring in terms of consistency of approach. The deeply established concept of professional judgment means that individuals are empowered to challenge things they disagree with and whilst there has been some evidence that universities have increased the use of mechanisms to ensure consistency and more overt checking of academics, few would argue that leadership techniques are similar to those described by Beynon.

At the other end of the leadership spectrum is what we have termed ‘prosecco leadership’, a style that stresses the autonomy of the individual and distances the leader from those lower in the hierarchy. In this model, academic freedom and autonomy is paramount and the leader is separated from everyone else, both physically and in terms of power and control, appearing only on sporadic occasions when really needed. This approach borrows much from the well-established *laissez-faire* approach but adds the caveat that there is a physical divide (in recent times this has been a digital divide) between the two groups. Superficially there is much to like about this form of leadership; academics are given considerable freedom to work in a way that suits them and whilst they can turn to leaders for support if needed, fundamentally they work independently. The reality of this leadership approach tends to be a little less positive than the utopia described. Simmons (2010) described the inefficiencies and lack of professionalism that often occurred in the further education sector when a variant of this approach was used prior to the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the tendency is for a disconnect to occur between academics and the seemingly absent leader. This leads to a lack of consistency and accountability in organisations, as well as feelings of isolation from academics who lack the reassurance and recognition that a good (and visible) leader might bring.

To bridge the gap between these two approaches, we are proposing an alternative approach that blends the benefits of these disparate styles. This approach, which we call Schrödinger’s Leadership, is one where the leader has a constant presence in the organisation, but that presence is mostly controlled by the academic themselves and so leaders are used in different ways by each individual. To illustrate the point, think about Betelgeuse, the titular character in the Tim Burton film. Summoned only when his name is called three times, he is both present (if the person wants him) and absent (if they don’t). The same principle applies in our model. The leader is present when needed but much of this control resides with the academic who can control their appearance.

This model has become increasingly important with the move to more flexible working, including hybrid working (Dale, 2020). During the pandemic, many of us were in the situation of working for a new employer for some time without either having met many colleagues or in some cases, without having physically set foot in the university. This distance (both physical and in some cases emotional) from the organisation created challenges for leadership as each member of staff will react differently and hence a ‘one size fits all’ approach might not be appropriate. Whilst part of the leadership function revolves around creating structures to support staff, the shift to a hybrid style of working has necessitated a far more individual style of leadership.

This approach does place significant demands on the educational leader. If leaders can be summoned with little notice, then the feeling of being ‘on call’ can impact on any work/life balance and it is inevitable that some academics will require more time than others, so it is possible that feelings of unfairness or favouritism can start to show. There are also questions about the skills that leaders need when adopting this style. Putting the onus on academics to interact with leaders means that those in charge need to have a multiplicity of skills given the different demands of individuals. Sometimes, that requires far more time and skill than a more uniform approach.

Despite these issues, we would argue that there is a great deal of benefits that can be accrued from the adoption of a Schrödinger Leadership approach. The concept of a leader being present, but only appearing when required can create feelings of being supported, but not being constantly monitored whilst the idea that leadership can mould itself to the individual is likely to address any concerns about leadership styles clashing with academics’ expectations. Finally adopting this approach can promote significant benefits in terms of the communication methods adopted by an organisation. Whilst an approach based on the instant access to Betelgeuse might not be either feasible or desirable, encouraging two-way, direct communication when leaders and academics interact when they *want* to, rather than when they *have* to, can have significant benefits and is another reason why Schrödinger’s Leadership can have a transformative effect on today’s hybrid organisations.

References

Beynon, H (1975) *Working for Ford,* London:Allen Lane/Penguin Books

Dale, G (2020) *Flexible Working: How to Implement Flexibility in the Workplace to Improve Employee and Business Performance,* London: Kogan Page

Department for Education (1992) *Further and Higher Education Act*; London: HMSO.

Simmons, R (2010) Golden years? Further education colleges under local authority control, *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 32:4, 359-371, DOI: 10.1080/03098770802395579