It Takes Two: Co-Leadership in British Higher Education

Track Dinning

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Lennon and McCartney, Victoria and Albert, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett….. sometimes the best things come in twos. Take one person away from the duo and somehow both are diminished. You end up with the butler in Noel’s House Party rather than the Two Ronnies, The Frog Chorus rather than Hey Jude and a diminished monarch, yet when it comes to educational leadership, many organisations have shied away from the concept of joint leadership. Whilst a significant number of the established orthodoxies of leadership have been challenged in recent years, scant recognition has been paid to the idea of having two people in charge of a large School within Higher Education. Instead approaches such as situational leadership, compassionate leadership and empowered leadership have assumed that leadership at the top level is in the hands of a single person who defines and helps implement a culture. However, given the increased size of many educational establishments, the idea of concentrating power in the hands of one individual seems simultaneously both risky but also inherently conservative. The aim of this blog is to explore the inculcated view that power should rest in one person’s hands and present an alternative approach which involves the principle of joint responsibility and accountability. We will explore the advantages of this approach and how to avoid the pitfalls whilst presenting our three key points to follow for anyone who wants to adopt this approach.

When appointed to any new role, a level of anxiety is to be expected, but being appointed to a shared senior role, certainly left us, as the successful candidates, with a significant number of questions. How would the role be split? How would we ensure that we were in touch with everything happening across the whole school? How would we manage the staff? How would staff perceive the co-leadership? Would we have a shared vision? How are we going to make this work and most of all: how were we going to work together?

Our roles are part of the leadership team of the School of Business and Management at Liverpool John Moores University. A School that is in the heart of the city, both geographically and emotionally, who prides itself in providing knowledge and experience to its students who are often local to the Merseyside area. With over 3500 students and 140 staff it is classed as a large School in the sector and one that has expanded rapidly over the last few years. Before our appointment there was a very flat structure with one Director having overall control of the School and eight Programme Leaders (PLs), each looking after a specific subject area. This meant a high degree of autonomy for the PLs and an exceptionally wide span of control for the Director. As is typical in this structure, day-to-day issues would often draw staff away from working strategically, instead they would tend to focus on the operational issues associated with running large programmes. Our appointment was designed to ensure that there was a missing link between the PLs and the Director and provide an opportunity for PLs to look at the bigger picture. Our appointment was also designed to help the Director focus on wider objectives within the university instead of being consumed by issues within the School.

Right from the start of the co-leadership role, what was obvious was that we shared a passion and motivation to bring about change within the School. Having a very clear, shared end goal meant that decisions could be measured against that goal and hence a degree of consistency of decision-making could be achieved even though two people were making the decisions. Once the granular detail of the agreed end goal and the culture was decided, we started to formulate a way to divide the key job roles and develop effective communication channels. There were some tasks that suited either of us but also roles that we were both keen to lead on. We used our individual strengths to offset weaknesses. Acknowledging this was the point when we recognised how our relationship was beginning to organically develop, into a shared leadership approach. We were also keen to create an environment that was seamless for staff that enabled them to approach either of us and not just their line manager.

According to O’Toole, Galbraith and Lawler (2002) with shared leadership comes shared responsibility. Both people have equal influence rather than a single leader and commonly shared leadership results in greater **productivity, and faster-paced change.** **This is something we have certainly witnessed. Having two people lead on different initiatives has meant we have been able to bring about change in a timelier manner. This did cause some initial issues, as with any changes to an established culture, a shift in a relatively short space of time can cause uncertainty and anxiety amongst some staff. To balance this, a key decision made at the start was that we would be as visible as possible (either face-to-face or given hybrid working, online) so members of staff can ask questions and have an open, 2-way communication method with us.**

**An emerging advantage and something we had not thought of was the knock-on effect of our role to other staff within the faculty and central university teams. Between us we have more availability for staff as one of us will always be available either face to of online and this has reduced the number of queries that our colleagues make to staff outside of the Business School.**

 Finally, when we embarked on this journey, we wanted to bring about a collaborative culture to the School. As members of staff see us working together, the hope is that this becomes ‘the norm’ and hence a collegiate approach becomes embedded within the School. Whilst we both have a firm commitment to this ideal, it is not entirely altruistic, by encouraging a collegiate approach, leadership can be more widely spread amongst the School which helps both the development of leadership skills for many colleagues' and ensures that we do not have to oversee all projects.

As with any leadership approach for all the advantages it is imperative to be aware of the **pitfalls.** No matter how closely you work together, when there is co-leadership, it is inevitable that occasionally staff receive mixed messages. This is less likely to be problem if the co-leaders have regular contact and are clear who handles which tasks, but the system is not infallible. In some cases, staff may perceive the decision-making process to be lengthier, if leaders must discuss and agree on everything, but it is hoped that again clear goals, communication and trust will give agency to each leader to make decisions on behalf of both leaders. Knowing that your co leader will support your decision, even if they disagree is critical for this type of leadership to work.

A final pitfall is that staff may feel overconnected or micromanaged, if the co-leaders do not set out their roles and responsibility clearly. Staff can become confused if both leaders are asking staff to do or provide something at the same time. We have also considered if having two leaders for staff to turn to will prevent staff from becoming autonomous. Being aware of this and continuing to give staff agency to lead and change, we hope will overcome this pitfall.

So what have we learnt in the time we have been in these roles and what **key points of advice** would we give anyone thinking of adopting this style of leadership? There are three key points:

* **Have a shared vision and passion for the job but recognise differences**. Whilst co-leaders may have different innate styles of leadership and are likely to set about tasks in different ways, having a clear end goal, ensures clarity. Setting out roles and responsibilities, allows co-leaders to work on different tasks, with the knowledge of what the other is handling. With this comes a respect for each other space. Linked to this is that it is important that both parties have complimentary competencies and skills, this stops the danger of repetition of tasks.
* **Open and honest clear lines of communication and supporting each other’s decision.** Being able to engage in an open and productive conversation means co-leaders need to keep an open mind. Their ideas will be challenged and tested but this can lead to smarter decisions. Lines of communication need to be always open both between leaders but also with members of staff.
* **Regular reflection** on progress of the tasks and being able to work through any failure and agree new course of action. This part of the co-leadership process is critical if there is to be shared success and failure.

Conclusions and takeaways

Heenan and Bennis (1999) drew an analogy of co-leadership with a well-functioning marriage, in that it requires trust, a commitment to a common goal, the labour is fairly divided and disagreements are resolved without the loss of mutual respect. We would agree with this analogy and add that its success is dependent on having a shared vision and goals, that allowed open communication between both parties as well as being able to present honest opinions. Being able to critically reflect on things and acknowledge when a new course of action is required, are key elements.

Co-leadership appears to meet today’s challenges in higher education and is seen as a compliment to a long-standing situation leadership style (Bolden, 2011). For us, co-leadership can capitalise on a ‘two heads are better than one’ and operating as a single unit the co-leaders are able to learn, innovate and perform making them more flexible to response to new demands within the sector.

**References**

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