

THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN DOING MORE WITH LESS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Public universities in most developed countries are facing increasing pressure to “do more with less”. Many have invariably come to terms with reality by repeatedly restructuring and downsizing to stay lean and survive. Effective leadership to see through drastic organizational changes is a must, whilst resistance to change is also one thing management needs to face squarely in the course of change. This paper offers some provocative thoughts to university management in gaining synergistic effect by the dual priming of Transformational Leadership and an Employee-Centred Resistance to Change Perspective to afford the “doing more with less”.

THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN DOING MORE WITH LESS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

INTRODUCTION: UNIVERSITIES UNDER SIEGE

Public universities, being publicly funded, are part of the overall public sector which has been undergoing an era of change since the Thatcher Government and the Reagan Administration in the 1980s: the era of government re-invention on the entrepreneurial doctrine of “steering rather than rowing” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). As it developed, we began to witness, among many other phenomena, the overall decline in public funding (OECD, 1990), and the establishment of the logic of “maximum service delivery at lowest administrative cost” in the public sector. This is known nowadays as “doing more with less”, and the adherence to this logic has become almost ritualistic.

Consequently, public universities in most developed countries are facing increasing pressure to “do more with less”. Public funding for tertiary education has been shrinking virtually unchecked. From 1975 to 2000, there was a drop from 1.4% of GDP to 0.9% of GDP in the U.S., 1.4% to 0.7% in the U.K., and 2.0% to 0.8% in Australia (OECD, 1992 and 2003). Yet massification of higher education, i.e. the soaring enrolment of young people in tertiary education, has also gone unabated since that same era (OECD, 1992 and 2003). Higher education is getting scarcely elite (enrolment rate 15% or below), and massification (15-50% enrolment rate) is now being the norm, whilst universalizing (enrolment rate at 50% or above) becomes the ideal. Public universities could be fairly described as under siege for more than two decades by this “double squeeze”: *massification of higher education* and *dwindled public funding*.

In order to stay lean and survive, public universities need to rework (Marginson and Ramsden, 2000) and transform to become more entrepreneurial (Clark, 2000). Various forms of organizational restructuring, downsizing, and process reengineering have repeatedly taken place in many public universities, and many more are yet to come. However, organizational change often falls short of expectations, no matter how brilliant it is being planned. Its execution depends much on effective leadership to see through all the drastic and radical changes, and that organizational resistance to change (RtC) is one thing management needs to face squarely in the course of change. This paper tries to offer some theoretical advances by zooming in on the kind and level of leadership that both transforms people to perform beyond expectations and embraces an employee-centred RtC perspective appreciating the positive role of RtC in change. The search here is for synergistic effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE “PUSH” AND “PULL”

In almost all restructuring and downsizing, the work processes of an organization need to be revamped to tie in with new organizational structures. The heated emergence of business process reengineering (BPR) by the early 1990s, which is still much alive and well today (BPM, 2003), is no coincidence. It was meant to be an antidote to the then economic misfortunes of the Corporate America. BPR, and in its varied forms, was soon found equally enticing to public universities suffering under the “double squeeze” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1994; Grotevant, 1998). However, BPR allegedly suffered a formidable failure rate of 70 percent (Grint and Case, 1998), and the major reasons cited were *ineffective leadership* (Sutcliffe, 1999) and *resistance to change* (Cao, et al., 2001). This constitutes an intriguing question on how to make any reengineering more successful.

The “Push” for Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (TL) was pioneered by Burns (1978) and later expanded and operationalized by Bass (1985). It comprises five factors: *idealized influence (attributed)*, *idealized*

influence (behaviours), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Five Factors of TL

Idealized Influence (Attributed)	Create Followers' attributions as how they perceive the leader's power, confidence, & transcendent ideals. This is an emotional component shifting follower's self-interest toward the interest of the greater good.
Idealized Influence (Behaviours)	Perform specific leader behaviours that reflect the leaders' values & beliefs, their sense of mission & purpose, & their ethical & moral orientation.
Inspirational Motivation	Inspire & motivate followers to reach ambitious goals seemed unreachable by raising followers' expectations & communicating confidence, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pygmalion Effect).
Intellectual Stimulation	Question the status quo, appeal to followers' intellect to make them question their assumptions, & invite innovative & creative solutions to problems.
Individualized Consideration	Provide customized socio-emotional support to followers, whilst developing & empowering them. This is achieved by coaching & counseling, maintaining frequent contacts, & helping to self-actualize.

(Adapted from Antonakis, J. & House, R.J., 2002)

As defined by Bass (1985) and Yukl (1998), it is meant to motivate others to do more than they originally intended, and often even more than they thought possible. TL is of particular relevance for public universities under the aforesaid siege to do more with less. Under a shrunk resource input to deliver an expanded performance output, work intensification becomes the norm for nearly all employees. Public universities, like all other organizations in the public sector, have a much more strenuous staff appraisal system than commercial undertakings in recognizing good performances and punishing bad ones. And a chasm-like gulf exists between the greatest amount of effort employees can make in their work and the minimum amount required to avoid dismissal. The successful practice of TL here, though by no means easy, would "augment" the effect of ordinary transactional leadership common in otherwise more commercial settings, leading to performance beyond expectations (Bass and Avolio, 1993), as required under the aforesaid siege.

TL has now achieved an unprecedented acceptance in the management and leadership literatures (Antonakis and House, 2002). Such acclaim apparently qualifies TL to be the kind and level of leadership required by BPR to achieve "doing more with less" and to harness RtC at the same time, thereby attaining a synergistic effect. However, with the widespread advocacy of TL even prior to the emergence of BPR, BPR nonetheless suffered formidable failures because of ineffective leadership and RtC. Something extra is needed on how to quell RtC from within.

TL as a field of study is still young, and as such, theories are ahead of data (Avolio and Yammarino, 2002). The underlying influence processes of TL is still controversial and very much a research subject (Yukl, 1998). Kark and Shamir (2002) offer an inquisitive understanding in this respect by looking into how TL primes or activates the respective relational and collective identity of the followers to explain these underlying influence processes; whilst Humphreys and Einstein (2003) focus on the notion of "follower-centredness" and "personal power" by tracing TL from the behavioral science era, quoting Follett's leadership of function (Follett, 1933) and Barnard's authority resting on the consent of the subordinates (Barnard, 1938). These more recent researches on leadership look not only on how leaders are to lead, but, perhaps more importantly, on how followers are prepared to be led. Therefore, it is postulated that effective leadership for public universities under siege should not rely and tap simply on TL, but also on the employees' preparedness to be led.

The “Pull” from Resistance to Change

RtC is defined as the perceived behaviour of organizational members who seem unwilling to accept or help implement organizational change (Coghlan, 1993). Classical studies on RtC are overwhelmingly unilateral from the management standpoint (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). And RtC is often viewed as adversarial and detrimental that need to be eliminated and quashed (Waddell and Sohal, 1998). Such negative labelling has allegedly confounded the problem of effecting change by promulgating a dichotomous thinking of labour versus management (Dent and Goldberg, 1999).

Appreciation of RtC from a more pluralistic employee-centred perspective and its role in organizational change is only relatively recent (Waddell and Sohal, 1998). RtC is now being construed, among many others, as having a psychological cycle of its own (Conner, 1998) in which people would go through some psychological sequences like denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and testing out, before accepting any negative change that is beyond one's control. RtC is also considered a natural outcome of people's internal defence mechanism (Bovey and Hede, 2001) that arises involuntarily in response to any psychic danger; and it also arises unconsciously to alleviate one's anxiety. RtC could also be located from the process and product of employees' background conversations and discourse that constitute the constructed reality (Ford, et al., 2002); and as such, this implicit, unspoken backdrop becomes both a context and a reality in which change is being perceived and, as the case may be, resisted upon. RtC is also related with people's cognition and affect (Paterson and Hartel, 2000) where anxiety emotions and justice cognitions play an important mediating role in the decision to resist. RtC could well be viewed as having utilities for corporate goals (Waddell and Sohal, 1998), like its influence towards greater organizational stability by striking a delicate balance between consent and dissent, despite any urge for change which might after all be inappropriate, not well thought through, or even plain wrong. Piderit (2000) argues that responses to change are very often ambivalent in that attitudes to support or oppose change could occur positively on one dimension and negatively on another, and that positive and negative ones could even co-occur within one dimension simultaneously. Collinson's (1994) non-polarized perspective of RtC indeed foreshadowed such viewpoint by pointing out that “resistance and consent are rarely polarized extremes on a continuum of possible worker discursive practices. Rather, they are usually inextricably and simultaneously linked, often in contradictory ways within particular organizational cultures, discourses, and practices”.

More importantly, RtC is significantly related with the violation of the employment psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989; McLean Parks and Kidder, 1994), and the perceived organizational justice done (McLean Parks and Kidder, 1994; Paterson and Hartel, 2000). Rousseau (1989) defines psychological contract as “an individual's *belief* regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party. A psychological contract emerges when one party believes that a *promise* of future returns has been made, a contribution has been given and thus, an *obligation* has been created to provide future benefits. Restructuring, downsizing, and reengineering has tended to disrupt this reciprocal exchange, and monolithic organization as powerful contract maker is able to dictate and re-dictate the terms of the work contract on the relatively powerless contract taker. The cost of power asymmetries would then be manifested in the employees' perceived loss of control in the employment relationship, which in turn exacerbate feelings of mistreatment and injustice when violations are perceived, thus becoming an important source of RtC. Moreover, when change is definite, and its negative impact being appropriated, organizational justice on the fairness dimension of both the outcome of change and the process of change becomes important in mediating consent or RtC. Distributive injustice leads to the seeking of retributive justice by employees, whilst procedural injustice also gives rise to interactional injustice being perceived by employees who would again seek retribution, i.e. RtC.

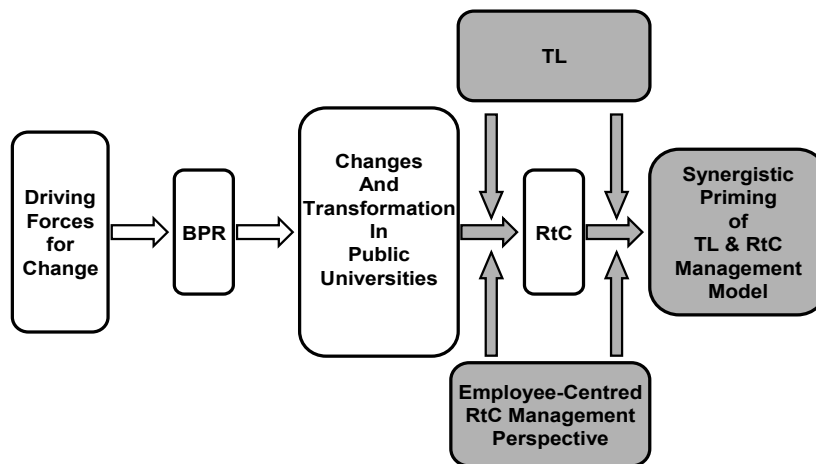
Thus, despite organizational power asymmetries, employees still have much room to manoeuvre along the “work behaviour continuum” (McLean Parks and Kidder, 1994), particularly on those areas composed of discretionary pro-role organizational citizenship behaviours (Organ, 1988).

The delivery of doing more with less by performance beyond expectations inevitably requires "quelling RtC from within the employees", i.e. the "pull" from RtC.

DISCUSSION: THE DUAL PRIMING FOR SYNERGY

The theoretical advance postulated here is that synergy is obtainable from the dual priming of TL and employee-centred RtC management perspective. Diagrammatically, the conceptual framework could be represented in the following figure:

Figure 1: Synergistic Priming of TL and RtC Management Model



The tapping of TL provides the exact "push", i.e. the required motivation, for employees to work twice as hard or even more out of their very own in the first place; and to achieve what they do not think is achievable in the second. This is made possible in practising the five factors of TL by leaders of an organization at various levels. According to Bass and Avolio (1997), the followings are some of the ways where TL could be manifested:

- 1) *Idealized Influence (Attributed)*: like instilling pride in the followers for being associated with them, going beyond self-interest for the good of the group, acting in ways that build others' respect, displaying a sense of power and confidence, making personal sacrifices for others' benefit, and reassuring others that obstacles will be overcome;
- 2) *Idealized Influence (Behaviours)*: like talking about their most important values and beliefs, specifying the importance of having strong sense of purpose, considering the moral and ethical consequences of decisions, emphasizing the importance of having a collective sense of mission, championing exciting new possibilities, and talking about the importance of trusting each other;
- 3) *Inspirational Motivation*: like talking optimistically about the future and enthusiastically about what needs to be accomplished, articulating a compelling vision of the future, expressing confidence that goals will be achieved, providing an exciting image of what is essential to consider, and taking a stand on controversial issue;
- 4) *Intellectual Stimulation*: like re-examining critical assumption to question whether they are appropriate, seeking differing perspectives when solving problems, getting others to look at problems from many different angles, suggesting new ways of looking at how to complete

assignments, encouraging non-traditional thinking to deal with traditional problems, and encouraging rethinking those ideas which have never been questioned before;

- 5) *Individualized Consideration*: like spending time teaching and coaching, treating others as individuals rather than just as a member of the group, considering an individual as having different needs, abilities, and aspirations from others, helping others to develop their strengths, listening attentively to others' concerns, and promising self-development.

An employee-centred RtC management perspective, on the other hand, provides the "pull" to quell RtC from within the employees. It understands that employees, when faced with a negative change beyond control, take time to go through some psychological stages, including denial and bargaining, before being able to accept the change. Proactive management will see to and work through these stages to help employees out to pave ways for change. Such management perspective would also afford appropriate tolerance for any manifestation of internal defence, and even offer proper guidance for maladaptive behaviour of projection and acting out. It would not simply crush RtC right away and risks losing the more matured and thought-through support in the longer term. It will also pay more vigilance to employees' background conversation and locate RtC more in their socially constructed reality than in the employees themselves as individuals. The understanding and ability to differentiate this background into that of complacency, resignation, or cynicism in nature (Ford, et al., 2002) should help fine tuning measures for the management of change.

On the other hand, if management is aware of and alert to the mediating role of employees' cognition and affect on change, the way of steering change initiatives would probably take quite a different approach. Possible misinterpretation, wrong reasoning, inappropriate feelings, and unnecessary RtC might be avoided all together. This is all the more important when the change we faced is getting more rapid and complex, and often involves a complete conceptual redefinition or reorientation. People need time to let their cognition and affect to assess the situation and react. This bears implications on the playing out of the first stage of a change process. Due care needs to be taken on employees' cognitive and affective formation, and that proper assessment on the emotional propensities and emotional intelligence of different employees or groups of employees should also be made. Here, the noting of ambivalence in employees' response to change, and the non-polarized perspective of consent and resistance only adds critical weightings to the aforesaid management implications.

RtC, when taken on a more pluralistic employee-centred perspective as advocated here, displays its utilities in the existence and reflection of a dissenting view, minority as it may often be. Optimal level of RtC is considered organizationally healthy to provide the much needed element that drive discussion, debate, and the renewed search for better options in an otherwise conforming majority taking truth in just numbers and the fear of disapproval by the majority. Dissent is also fruitful to creation, to new ways of doing things, and therefore to transformation where the baseline of change here lies.

The psychological contract of employment is one further and significantly important point to take note by management in quelling RtC from within. One must understand that mutual and reciprocal expectations between employers and employees do not only cover how much work is to be performed for how much pay. It also involves some other intangibles like rights, privileges, and obligations that are not written into any formal agreement, and yet they determine work behaviours powerfully. Those discretionary pro-role organizational citizenship behaviours could only be forthcoming when change is administered in such a way that disruptions be confined to transactional rather than relational ones. According to Robinson, et al., (1994), the mere inequity of a transactional nature may still be resolved by adjusting transactional balance between inducements and contributions between two parties, but for relational violations like mutual trust, it may destroy the employment relationship to an extent that is often irreparable. The perception of organizational justice from the employee's viewpoint is a crucial factor here. McLean Parks and Kidder (1994) opined that when injustice is perceived in the relational contract, the contract may become more transactional, and work behaviours less pro-role and more anti-role; and if injustice

is perceived on the distributive, procedural, or interactional dimension, the results are likely to be cumulative and reaction, i.e. RtC in this respect, therefore becomes more pronounced. Thus it is essential for change management to see to the possible repercussion effects of any violation of the psychological contract, and the perception of organizational justice herewith, from the viewpoint of the employees.

The synergy should come from this “push” and “pull”. The push provides the required motivation, the charisma that augments ordinary transactional leadership into one that activates performance beyond expectations. However, history tells that TL by itself alone could not generate sufficient momentum to break the siege. The pull needs to come around to add force on it, making the redundant in any restructuring, downsizing, and layoffs feel less victimized and see organizational justice done, and the survivors seek no retributive justice because of work intensification, and even get uplifted to devote their very best at a time when they are needed most.

Empirical investigation is now underway to ascertain the existence and impact of such synergistic effect.

CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATION

How to change and how to manage change is of equal importance in the assurance of change result. Apparently millions and millions of dollars were spent in the consultation for and implementation of change in public universities in pursuit of the elusive goal of savings of many more millions to make ends meet and to excel in performance at the same time. There are numerous counts of structural revamping and process reengineering embedded in these changes, but hardly has one heard of due attention being paid to the possible synergistic effect from the dual priming of TL and RtC. It is, on the other hand, more readily observable that many universities are managed to the best ability of their management team whose members are, or have once been, senior academics established in their research and dedicated in their teaching. We should realize that management and leadership skills do not necessarily and always come with the assumption of a position. Rather, they need to be properly nurtured, and “it is incumbent upon the University to provide the infrastructure and opportunities for the senior academic managers to undertake training in management and leadership skills and continuing professional development” (HKU, 2003). The same perhaps holds true for senior administrative managers as well in these institutions.

The policy implication here for public universities at large is clear and simple. The success of any measures to achieve the “doing more with less” hinges to a significant degree on how to manage change, and the dual priming of TL and RtC in the course of change is one critical navigator worthy of some serious pondering. The issue of public accountability is at stake here.

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