

LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE, A MUST FOR CRISIS PERIOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

MIRCEA REMUS SABĂU¹
DĂNUȚ NEACȘU²

Abstract

Leadership is always a matter of focus for both scholars, private and public institutions, especially nowadays when the whole planet is suffering from a worldwide financial crisis, which has led to an international uncertainty. The present drastic changes of the social environment forced higher education institutions to respond and this conducted to the appearance of the leadership change issue. Current times can be considered as very difficult ones for educational leaders, especially since they are continuously faced with shifting environments, new provocations, new stakes and in the same time, new threats. In order to remain competitive in the global market and also in order to become prepared for the changing international environment, academic leaders must change. The present financial crisis is shaped by a sense of urgency and reality. Due to the fact that it affects plenty of people and various countries, it is also characterized by transboundary effects. Taking into consideration these circumstances, the necessity for quick crisis solution occurs. Accordingly, the aim of this project is to investigate the leadership problem in the academic education area during the present financial crisis. The researcher found it appealing to study the effects of external circumstances on higher education leadership. The conducted analysis discusses possible guidelines for a higher education leader to use especially in crisis situations as nowadays. The researcher plans to answer the following question: what must be analyzed when developing a model or method that can be used as guidance when leading in crisis times?

Keywords: leadership, crisis, higher education, academic, change.

Introduction

The concept of leadership is still of actuality and importance³, in spite of “its too many definitions, and deliberation, all contain some common process elements like personal commitment, relationship building, vision creation, ethics, and vision into reality as few examples”⁴.

The contemporary world is defined by complexity and precipitation, shifting values, and therefore a change in crises. According to Jackson & Parry, “leadership represents the process of influencing all the activities that a certain department of human resources makes towards achievement an objective”⁵. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the interpersonal process between a leader and his followers. Lundgren sees leadership as “a process made up of three factors: leaders, followers, and the relationship between these two factors”⁶.

For a leader to be able to influence followers, a basic method is to “create a vision, since this is the only manner to have a realistic, credible view, attractive future for the organization”⁷. This can

¹ Senior Lecturer Ph. D. candidate, West University of Timișoara (email: remus.mircea@yahoo.com)

² Senior Lecturer Ph. D. candidate, “Andrei Șaguna” University of Constanța (email: danut.neacsu@yahoo.com)

³ Bennis, Warren and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, Collins Business Essentials, 2007.

⁴ Zomorrodian, Asghar, “New Approach to Strategic Planning: the Impact of Leadership and Culture on Plan Implantation via the three Cs: Cooperation, Collaboration and Coordination”, Proceedings of ASBBS, Volume 18, Number 1, Las Vegas, (2011): 1128.

⁵ Jackson & Parry, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2008) 12-13.

⁶ Lundgren, Mikael, *Lecture Leadership and rhetoric, An introduction to classical rhetoric*, Kalmar: Linnaeus University, 2010.

⁷ Bennis, Warren and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, (Collins Business Essentials, 2007):

be applied to both academic organizations and to business ones as well. Based on the above issued mentioned, the problem of this article is that *higher education institutions must try and achieve successful leadership for achieving environmental competitiveness and increase their performance on crisis period.*

Due to this feeling that the crisis is global, due to this change of the character of a crisis, solutions must be found. Thus, a change in handling a crisis becomes a must. Hence, the present article contributes to this issue by focusing on the principle of academic crisis leadership.

The major objective of the present analysis is to determinate the necessary tools and techniques in order to guarantee successful higher education leadership during crisis period. Secondary research objectives are: to find out leader and employee perception about change and leadership through crisis; to determine, through literature review, the key incursions that conducted to a successful leadership redesign, to evaluate the implementation of leadership model in crisis period within the higher education institutions and to observe leadership change in crisis period within academic institutions.

The main purpose of this article is to carefully examine the leadership conducted in crisis times. The researcher's major intention is to provide/ set up a model that can be of great use as guidance for an academic leader who finds himself/ herself leading in crisis situations. Also, the leadership redesign must be implemented in higher education institutions, since they are undergoing obscure times with a very confused vision of the future⁸.

Implementation of the study

In this part the researcher will explain and justify the approach to meet his final aim. Also, the method for the gathering of data for the research will be presented.

Background

The Asia Crisis (1997) and also the Russian Default Crisis (1998), represent the biggest two crisis that the whole world ever experienced, apart from the financial crisis of 2007/2008 which was the third major financial crisis which occurred during the last eleven years. The present international financial crisis appeared in the United States of America, but its effects have been witnessed by numerous instances globally.

On the national level, Romania, a developing country has also been affected by this crisis. Thus, bad consequences have been experienced by institutions nationwide. The public sector has been particularly exposed to the financial crisis worldwide and the Romanian public institutions are no exceptions.

Accordingly, Romanian higher education institutions have been exposed straightly to the crisis, and key implications for Higher Education have been: harsh public cuts, the cancelation of new tenure posts, the suppression of many currently offered tenure posts; the decreasing of public investments and the reduction of private funds donations or cooperation from behalf of a tormented private sector, donations meant for research, development and testing. Thus, as economic troubles started to develop and put its mark on the academic world, academic leadership's abilities and structure⁹ were questioned.

In this uncertain context, the employees of the higher education institutions unexpectedly found themselves within a medium that is highly changing day the day as a consequence of the crisis. It is clear nowadays that these changes caused an insecurity, which conducted to a certain sensation of vulnerability of the employees due to the troublesome situation. Even at present, it is appropriate

⁸ Guigné, Anne de, "2010, année de convalescence pour les banques". *Le Figaro*, February 15, 2010.

⁹ Kabouridis Georgios.& Kakarelidis, George, "Academic leadership in Greek higher educational institutions under economic and social crisis", 2nd WIETE Annual Conference on Engineering and Technology Education, Pattaya, (2011):70.

to admit that higher education employees are not secure about their work especially now, when times are drastically changing.

In this crisis period, when an employee does not feel secure, he/she may develop an imperative request of support from the nearest leader be it rector, dean, a leader from the Senate. Accordingly, academic leadership in crisis times requires “consultation, reflection, consensus, and a process orientation”¹⁰, the 3Es being stressed: “efficiency, effectiveness, and economy as the leading values in the governance of public higher education”¹¹. According to De Boer and Huisman, three variants can at the same time be found in a single university: oriented towards efficiency, oriented towards market and oriented towards users¹². Human resources inevitably request or search guidance in these situations. Whether as citizens or as academic institutions employees, most of the time people are looking for somebody to present them ways to proceed, make up a pattern for them to act in accordance with and to generate meaning for problems they face day by day. Be it consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, academic employees need a person whom to follow in both secure and insecure times, they need a *leader*. Also, the academic organization should never be seen as a closed system. Thus, a higher education institution can be affected not only by internal factors but also by external conjunctures¹³. In this respect, the researcher considered it interesting to analyze academic leadership in insecure times and explore the manner how a leader in a higher education institution affected by the crisis may act. The main question resides in the fact of whether or not leadership differs in periods characterized by crisis or stability.

Methodology of the study

The research will be highly analytic and it will have a qualitative nature. The major purpose is to establish both challenges and determinants that conduct academic leadership change in crisis time, and to wisely manage these factors in stimulating higher education leadership and thus reinforcing the successful performing of crisis leadership.

Qualitative study represents an exploratory research which tries to examine a less known area, inspect the major dimensions of an issue, make suppositions, and comprehend outcomes or operational research due to in-depth analysis of interviewee responses either in a group or single. Thus, the researcher interviewed six higher education institution employees and their leader. The interviews held were a combination between in-person interviews, telephone interviews and correspondence over email. In the table below all the interviewees are being presented:

Table 1. Presentation of the interviewees

	Gender	Education	Position within the educational institution	Prior experience in educational institution	Type of Interview
<i>The leader</i>	M	PhD.	Leader of the department	Yes, almost 30 years	In person
<i>Interviewee A</i>	M	PhD.	Manager	Yes, almost 20 years	In person
<i>Interviewee B</i>	F	PhD.	Manager	Yes, >20 years	phone + email

¹⁰ Ferren, Ann S., Kennan, William R. and Lerch, Sebastian H., “Reconciling corporate and academic cultures”. *Peer Review*, 3, 3, (2001): 9-11.

¹¹ Currie, Jan, De Angelis, Richard, De Boer, Harry, Huisman, Jeroen and Lacotte, Claude, *Globalizing practices and university responses: European and Anglo-American differences*. Westport, Connecticut: London: Praeger, 2003.

¹² De Boer, Harry and Huisman, Jeroen, “The New Public Management in Dutch Universities”. In: *Toward a New Model of Governance for Universities: A Comparative View*. Edited by Braun, Dietmar and Merrien, Francois-X., London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., 1999.

¹³ Hersey Paul & Blanchard Ken, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing human resources Fourth edition*. (N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1982): 6-7.

<i>Interviewee C</i>	M	PhD.	Custom manager	Yes, >30 years	phone
<i>Interviewee D</i>	M	PhD.	Custom manager	Yes, many years	phone + email
<i>Interviewee E</i>	F	PhD.	Custom manager	Yes, many years	phone + email
<i>Interviewee F</i>	M	PhD.	Custom manager	Yes, >30 years	phone + email

Benefits of the study

On the one hand, for nowadays academic leaders, practitioners who want to improve and this change their leadership style, the benefits of the study are:

It offers a framework as far as academic leadership is concerned.

It identifies the relevant characteristics for a crisis academic leader.

It makes people become aware of challenges encountered in the change of academic leadership in crisis period and also getting abilities in order to manage them. This should lead to trying to avoid challenges by acting proactive.

It is meant to back higher education institutions which have already begun the leadership change, but are facing problems, to distinguish domains that have not been paid enough attention while redesign leadership. In this manner, an educational institution can pin point the domains of disturbance and thus aspiring to solving the problems.

Since most academic employees are affected by the decisions made by their leaders, this research might be useful for academic leaders to improve their crisis leadership skills, especially since “the ever-increasing complexity and interdependence of today’s world calls for a critical transformation in leadership”¹⁴.

On the other hand, although the hereby study does not pretend to be exhaustive it does intend to analyze the most important literature written on the researched issue, which can be for the benefit of the researchers. Thus, for researchers a benefit of the study is the fact that it provides a framework for the crisis leadership within a higher education institution, which is done through a literature review and also through empirical study.

According to the above mentioned framework the author evaluated the implementation of crisis leadership within higher education institution.

The research identifies domains for further analysis, and thus can be seen as a beginning or commencement for further research.

Limitations

As the researcher has already mentioned, the present crisis is still an ongoing process and even at present, its outcome remains unclear. In the same time, the crisis is also shaped by a high turmoil, an enormous number of parties affected, as well as high degree of various perceptions. Mainly because of these issues, the researcher finds it necessary to constrain the analyzed objective of his work and therefore to establish some concrete limitations.

First of all, the researcher has chosen to investigate the impact the current crisis period has on a specific higher education institution. The focus of this study lies thus, on the leadership conducted in a specific University situated in Timisoara, Romania. In this purpose, the researcher has studied the leader of the educational institution and some selected employees.

Another restriction the researcher finds and wants to mention consists of the fact that the current crisis is still going on, so is still in progress. Hence, the necessity arises that most of the information gathered, which represents a basis for the study in the article, only makes reference to the data available until the first of January 2012. The main issue is the fact that, in a crisis changes easily

¹⁴ Yip, J., Ernst, Ch. & Campbell, M., “Boundary spanning leadership: Perspectives from the executive suite”, *A Center for Creative Leadership White Paper*. (2011): 4.

occur daily, an interruption in information collection being rather essential to maintain the composition and thematic consistency of the article.

Due to the complexity of the whole subject, another critic regard on the present work entails that the various opinions presented in the analysis comprises only the major issues of leadership. Therefore, the researcher disregarded issues which can be seen only as peripheral matters. Hence, the researcher decided to focus in the evaluation of the academic leadership of the West University of Timisoara in the crisis on several major issues, out of which the most important is the leadership aspect.

An additional restriction of the research is represented by the fact that leadership is not an issue which can be expressed by numbers. Moreover, findings concerning the leadership problem in this research cannot be quantified by clear measurements. Additionally, we transfer classic analytical principles of crisis leadership to the present crisis. Weick considers that this transformation can limit the sense making if the primary frames of references are not suitable to the present situation¹⁵. In our case, this restriction could lead to misjudgments and distorted results.

The last critics the researcher would like to mention, is the fact that the current work focuses on examining the leadership issue in the crisis from the perception of one academic institution from Timisoara.

Summary of the empirical findings

The analyzed participants have been working for a long time in the academic sector and during their careers they accumulated personal experience which has contributed to their personal maturity.

The leader was described as an emotional and optimistic scholar. All employees consider leadership a relational art especially at the academic level, employees being offered plenty of freedom of action in order to accomplish their tasks. Because of the uncertainty that the crisis created, took place a change of focus on tasks, which in return implemented a change of the academic leadership. Part of the interviewees seemed to be satisfied with the leadership so far, while others asked for a different leadership approach, mainly because the uncertainty affected them. The leader did see this request and accordingly, shifted his focus, even if not for all cases. The academic leader firmly thinks that leadership is shaped by circumstances, but he states that his openness and honesty in relationships does not change due to crisis times.

The leader and his personality traits

The leader described himself, and was described by interviewees A, B, D and F, mostly as an innovating person and therefore quite focused on creating new perspectives for the university. Further on, other characteristics associated with the leader were optimistic and self-confident. Accordingly, the leader was perceived as owning a great amount of self-knowledge, thing that the employees confirmed as well. After discussing several times with the leader, his statements about being positive and optimistic were confirmed. In the same time, he appeared as a helpful person, a finding confirmed also by interviewee D who stated that the leader is very interested about his colleagues.

During the research, several studies were analyzed, researches that implied certain features that a leader should have, such as: self-confidence, stress tolerance, engagement and knowledge. A leader, who appears to be self-confident and positive influences and inspires followers to achieve goals. As an employee, it is easy to listen to and to be impacted by a leader who is both positive and optimistic. In our case, due to the leader's long experience within academic leading positions, we are not entitled to question his knowledge. Therefore, we take for granted that the leader has experience

¹⁵ Weick, Karl, Sutcliffe, Kathleen M. & Obstfeld, David, "Organizing and the process of sense making", *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (2005):409-421.

and knowledge in academic leadership, which, according to Yukl, is a must for a leader¹⁶. Being an innovative person implies that a person is very motivated and creates new values of new products and services according to the crisis period. Interviewee A talked about this feature of the leader by confirming the leader's necessity of constantly being triggered and challenged. The same person also claims that the leader transfers his innovational spirit to the other members.

We realized that all interviewees perceive the leader in slightly different ways. This is natural, since various perceptions of a person's character represent a consequence of the individual upbringings and backgrounds. As a consequence, the employees are impacted differently by the personality traits of the academic leader.

The effect of external circumstances

Researchers consider the external circumstances, in our case, the financial crisis, affects the stability of the institution. Changes appeared in this stability will in turn affect the other subsystems, the academic leader and the employees, and all these will have high impact on leadership. Most of the time, similar effects of change in the stability are to be found both in the leader and the follower's acts. On the one hand, when everything is stable, both leader and followers are confident, which makes leadership use either "supportive" or "delegating" style. On the other hand, when in crisis, negative effects can occur, from uncertainty to insecurity.

We consider that the pyramid of Maslow can be easily evaluated in situations of crisis. The Maslow theory proves that the change in the needs of the followers because of a situation of uncertainty/crisis implies a leadership change. It is vital for every person affected by crisis to try and get a sentiment of security. Crisis times could lead to the pyramid's dislodgement and thus turning unstable due to a change in the needs of the academic employees. In this context, the main goal of the academic leader is to maintain the pyramid stable all the time, and be sure that his colleagues/employees are secured and have a sense of belonging to the University. The moment when the leader senses a change in the needs of the employees, he or she must step back and reconsider the aims of the academic leadership. The employees from the study are mature and ambitious and this signifies that their needs of self-esteem are very high in stable time. Taking this into consideration, it is highly important for the leader to keep the basic needs in mind when leading his followers in crisis times in order to keep the employees in a steady level of needs. The University where the study was done, did not discharge anyone because of the crisis up to the date when the research was conducted, which means that the major basic needs (psychological, feelings of security and belonging) of the employees have been assured.

For achieving these feelings, employees must find in their leader empathy and desire to discuss and also answer questions. According to the data gathered, the leader manages this task well. According to the interviewed employees, the leader took the time to answer general concern when the situation requested it, and showed support. Nevertheless, some feelings of discontentment were traced in some statements about the leadership. According to these statements, the leader did not, in all cases, consider the security of the Maslow pyramid.

Papworth, Milne and Boat state that the leader has to take on a flexible style of leading¹⁷. This comes in opposition to the basic fact that a leader must lead consistently, and use a single style of leadership in similar situations. The leader states that he is able to change his leadership style when needed, but firmly adds that his openness and honesty represent the basis of his leadership.

¹⁶ Yukl Gary A., "Managerial Leadership: A Review of Theory and Research", *Journal of Management* Vol. 15, No. 2, (1989):251-289.

¹⁷ Papworth, Milne & Boak. "An exploratory content analysis on situational leadership". *Journal of Management Development*; Vol. 28 No. 7, (2009):593-606.

The degree of maturity of the employees

The degree of maturity detected within the persons who took part to the study is quite similar. Judging from the answers received, all employees seem to be self-confident and looking for challenges to improve their results. Interviewees C, D and F stated that the daily tasks are done under high proper responsibility without much interaction with the leader. Also, employee E states that she takes proper initiatives, while employee B goes even further by designating herself manager in need.

All interviewed employees appear to have great experience, high education and well-reasoned answers to our questions, reason for which we will put them all in the highest maturity stage when the external world is stable.

When speaking about the present crisis time it appeared that interviewees A and E need greater support from the academic leader. Thus, according to interviewee A, during the worst times he felt a need for stronger personal support from the leader. Interviewee E stated to have desired for greater clearance. According to the theory of situational leadership this high support from the leader implies a decrease in the degree of maturity of the follower. Employee F said that more structure in the objectives performance would have been advisable but did not affect him very much. Interviewee B and C have also been impacted by the crisis times, but did not want a growing need of support to the same extent.

CONCLUSIONS

In this part of the article, the researcher draws conclusions from his findings and summarizes them in order to respond to the goal of this research. Also he presents further findings that are of high interest even if they do not meet the purpose of this particular research.

In analyzing the leadership in crisis situations, firstly the researcher referred to the impact of external circumstances. Thus, it was found that in the outside world, crisis is interfering in the internal institutional stability negatively. As a consequence, the employees within the higher education institutions are affected which in exchange affect their performance and thus the entire institution. From the research, it was found out that the degree of maturity of the employees tends to decrease when crisis strikes and times become unstable. The crisis and unpredictable times from the outside of the higher education institution makes the employees experience the feeling of insecurity and in this particular case, their characteristic basic needs are no longer satisfied.

Secondly, the researcher referred to the impact of personality traits of the leader. According to the research, it appears that the personality characteristics of the leader have effects on the employees. In the same time, it was found out that the employees see the leader in quite various ways, and the researcher though this was due to the fact that they had different upbringings and backgrounds. Accordingly, the features of the leader have different impact on various people; a characteristic that affects one employee in a negative way can affect another employee positively.

The researcher also established a guideline to leaders when leading in crisis times. It was found that it is the responsibility of the leader to equilibrate the exterior world with the inner educational organization in order to keep it stable in uncertain times. By this, the employees are being restored confidence of their security and of their basic needs being satisfied. Also, the leader must be aware of that he or she has personality characteristics that affect the other employees. It is of high relevance that a leader identifies which personality characteristics affect each employee and to what extent. If the leader plans to use these personality characteristics efficiently, the leader would stress the ones recognized as having positive effects on the employee and minimize the traits that may be conceived as negative. This knowledge will be of great advantage for the leader when motivating his employees to perform and to continue to satisfy higher needs.

In this period of crisis, when the degree of maturity of an employee is constantly decreasing, it is of major relevance for the leader to have recognized his or her personality characteristics that are of high importance for the employee. If the academic leader does this, he/she has a better chance of

helping the employee to increase his or her degree of maturity. At the moment when the maturity degree gets back to normal, the former internal institutional stability is being re-established.

When analyzing situational leadership as it has been described by Hersey and Blanchard the researcher tended to add some particularities to the theory. Thus, since the original theory does not make reference to the impact of external circumstances, or to the impact the personality characteristics of a leader have, we consider that the first theory must be completed. After studying the conclusions from this research, the researcher created an adding of the original theory. Thus, the existing model by Hersey and Blanchard was completed by two things: the impact of external factors and personality features of a leader.

This new modified model can offer a general framework for the leader in terms of academic leadership in crisis times. This model can be of use for any leader who wants to adapt or redesign his or her leadership in order to perfectly adjust it in crisis times. In this study, this modified model was used in order to gain a full perspective on the leadership conducted in the higher education institution of study.

It is of high importance for a leader to try and be flexible without having preconceived opinions about which leadership style to use. Thus, it is of great importance for the leader to pay attention to each and every circumstance and recognize each employee and external environment conditions for being able to correctly choose the leadership style.

It was proved that the relationships between the academic leader and the employees in crisis times were very different. The researcher found from the study that there is a great diversity in the relationships between the leader and his employees, and this is a rather common situation. In a work relationship employees and leaders affect each other. How well the relationship proves to develop is partly a result of the personality traits of the employees, the degree of maturity, the conducted leadership, internal circumstances within the higher education institution, or simply a match of different personalities.

One thing of great interest to look further into could be the effects on the entire academic institution if the leader has different relationships with the employees. We thus recommend the Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory by Graen George and Uhl-Bien Mary for further research.

References

- Bennis, Warren and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge*, Collins Business Essentials, 2007.
- Jackson & Parry, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2008) 12-13.
- Currie, Jan, De Angelis, Richard, De Boer, Harry, Huisman, Jeroen and Lacotte, Claude, *Globalizing practices and university responses: European and Anglo-American differences*. Westport, Connecticut: London: Praeger, 2003.
- De Boer, Harry and Huisman, Jeroen, "The New Public Management in Dutch Universities". In: *Toward a New Model of Governance for Universities: A Comparative View*. Edited by Braun, Dietmar and Merrien, Francois-X., London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd., 1999.
- Guigné, Anne de, "2010, année de convalescence pour les banques". *Le Figaro*, February 15, 2010.
- Ferren, Ann S., Kennan, William R. and Lerch, Sebastian H., "Reconciling corporate and academic cultures". *Peer Review*, 3, 3, (2001): 9-11.
- Hersey Paul & Blanchard Ken, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing human resources Fourth edition*. (N.J: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1982): 6-7.
- Kabouridis Georgios.& Kakarelidis, George, "Academic leadership in Greek higher educational institutions under economic and social crisis", 2nd WIETE Annual Conference on Engineering and Technology Education, Pattaya, (2011):70.
- Lundgren, Mikael, *Lecture Leadership and rhetoric, An introduction to classical rhetoric*, Kalmar: Linnaeus University, 2010.

- Papworth, Milne & Boak. "An exploratory content analysis on situational leadership". *Journal of Management Development*; Vol. 28 No. 7, (2009):593-606.
- Weick, Karl, Sutcliffe, Kathleen M. & Obstfeld, David, "Organizing and the process of sense making", *Organization Science*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (2005):409-421.
- Yip, J., Ernst, Ch. & Campbell, M., "Boundary spanning leadership: Perspectives from the executive suite", *A Center for Creative Leadership White Paper*. (2011): 4.
- Yukl Gary A., "Managerial Leadership: A Review of Theory and Research", *Journal of Management* Vol. 15, No. 2, (1989):251-289.
- Zomorrodian, Asghar, "New Approach to Strategic Planning: the Impact of Leadership and Culture on Plan Implantation via the three Cs: Cooperation, Collaboration and Coordination", *Proceedings of ASBBS*, Volume 18, Number 1, Las Vegas, (2011): 1128.