



In Praise of Quiet Leadership



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Introduction

In this essay I will take my cue from [Liz Jackson's recent contribution to this journal](#) (Jackson, 2021) and seek to build on her ideas about humility and vulnerability by exploring the notion of 'quiet' leadership. I believe that Liz speaks for many academics when she says that she does not feel that her personality or professional development has prepared her 'to become a forceful, visionary leader' (Jackson, 2021, p. 25). Rather she sees herself in more modest or humble terms. What concerns me in this essay are two things: firstly, the way in which academic leaders are expected to be dominant and outgoing individuals offering a 'transformational' agenda and, secondly, the way in which academic leadership is now widely understood as a career choice rather than an integrated part of *being* an academic. I want to question the widespread perception that extroverts make better leaders and will instead argue that academics with a more introverted personality can offer a lot in a higher education leadership role.

Hype and humility

Anyone taking even a cursory glance at advertisements for presidents, vice-presidents, deans and heads of academic departments on international recruitment websites will encounter a blizzard of hyperbole describing the kind of superhuman person being sought. Successful candidates, we are informed, will need to 'drive change', 'lead innovation', 'inspire others', have an 'ambitious agenda', 'deliver impactful cultural change' and, of course, present a fresh 'vision'. The word 'drive' is frequently invoked suggesting that academics are in need of being skilfully herded like a flock of dim-witted sheep.

The hyped-up way in which many leadership roles are described might make a rational person believe that there is something profoundly amiss within the recruiting institution that needs to be urgently addressed. While this may be the case in some universities it seems unlikely to characterise all of them. Yet the language invoked is nearly always the same. The impression created by this rocket-fuelled vocabulary is that universities are badly broken and in urgent need of radical reform. Its effect is that only those with sky high levels of self-confidence are likely to be interested in these jobs whether they possess a 'vision' or not. It seems that the age of the extrovert leader through which we have been living of late has well and truly seeped into the culture of academe. Anyone honest, or perhaps foolish enough, to say that their favoured approach is to 'muddle through' or 'keep the peace' between warring academic tribes rather than bring about immediate and impactful cultural change is unlikely to get anywhere near a short list or an interview chair.

How have we arrived at this state of affairs where hype is more valued than humility and honesty? I feel that part of the blame rests with the popularity of the dichotomy in the leadership literature between 'transformational' and 'transactional' leadership (Bass, 1998). This either/or provides a seductive but simplistic dualism where leaders of the former ilk are feted as charismatic visionaries while the latter are characterised as reactive control freaks. So-called transformational leaders are 'turnaround' kings who can think long term and gain commitment rather than mere compliance from their followers. Transactional leaders are pigeonholed, by contrast, as dull and uninspiring bureaucrats. This distinction has led to the idolisation of individuals able to demonstrate, or at least simulate, 'showy' qualities and a failure to recognise the merits of less extrovert leaders. Even in the context of the business world the transformational-transactional dichotomy is flawed inasmuch

that it fails to capture the nuances of leadership and the fact that the initial 'appeal and attractiveness of the narcissistic leader rapidly wanes' (Ong et al., 2016, p. 237). There are also ethical problems with the notion of transformational leadership. A phenomenon labelled as 'pseudo-transformational leadership' can occur when the self-interest of the leader, and their ego-driven desire to become an idol, overwhelms the collective goals within an organisation. Such leaders ultimately fail to gain the fundamental respect of followers (Barling et al., 2008, p. 852).

Another perhaps more obvious explanation for the desire for charismatic leaders in a higher education context is the migration of management (or 'new public management') principles into academe over the last twenty years or more. There has been a shift from a collegial to a more corporate university culture as McNay (1995) observed over the last 25 years. This is reflected in the changing nature of university senates where PowerPoint presentations by senior leaders supporting a tightly controlled agenda have largely displaced more open discussion and dialogue. Strategy documents abound focused on implementing change across the institution overwhelming initiatives and innovation at the local and individual level.

The fundamental problem with the fashion for transformational academic leaders, more in the style of a chief executive rather than a collegial *primus inter pares* ('first among equals'), is that many academics no longer think of 'leadership' as something that is for them. Academic leadership is now seen as a *career* rather than a *duty*; as something discrete from even being an academic. The growth in the numbers of (full) professors, partly as a result of the ascent of research evaluation internationally, has exacerbated this issue. In the 1960s in a UK university there would normally have been only one (full) professor in an academic department and this person would have automatically been the head as otherwise the department would not have had representation at the senate. Where there was more than one professor the role of head of department would usually have been rotated on a regular basis. Again, this meant that leadership was seen as a temporary duty or career hiatus rather than a new career. Even vice chancellors who are genuinely leading scholars as well as leaders can enjoy a successful post-presidential academic career, as the late and much-missed Professor David Watson demonstrated.

The advantages of introvertism

Is it necessary though for good academic leaders to be such confident and extrovert individuals? I would argue that there is a lot to be said for what has been described as 'quiet' leadership, especially in a higher education context where academics see themselves less as employees in a traditional sense and more as autonomous intellectuals. In this scenario the introverted leader can even be at something of an advantage.

The first higher education institution that I worked for was a small Church of England foundation called Christ Church College which originated as a teacher training establishment. In the early 1970s there were around 160 of these teacher training colleges in the UK but many were closed, taken over by universities or merged with further education institutions in the mid to late 1970s as a result of cuts to teacher training provision. Christ Church College was one of only a small number to survive due to its strategy of diversifying provision through offering a wider range of degree subjects including health-related professional courses and business and management studies. I was part of this diversification when I joined the College in 1989 as one of two new appointees tasked to develop business and management courses. The president (or principal as he was more humbly

titled) was a quiet and modest man called Dr. Michael Berry. If you met Dr. Berry on the campus he would often shuffle by without saying a word to you. He had an understated personality, never looked smart even in a suit, and was the opposite of the polished bellicose extrovert, laying claim to transformational powers. Yet this shy man ensured the survival of the College, which became a university in 2005, by leading its diversification strategy.

While it might sound counter-intuitive, research shows that introverts can make better leaders (Grant et al., 2010). Introverts are well suited to leading cultures where there is employee participation in decision-making, something that has conventionally been true in universities. Introverted leaders are good at listening and tend to be more receptive to the ideas of others. Extroverted leaders, on the other hand, can find such input threatening to their authority – and ego. Introverted leaders are also good at reflecting on their practice and while they enjoy having some space away from all the glad-handing this may also be seen as a positive quality since it enables them to process events and information. In many respects introverts are more suited to the demands of a so-called ‘post-heroic’ age of leadership. This refers to the idea of seeing leadership as a collaborative, team-based enterprise rather than based on just one, ‘great’ individual who can have a transformational effect on the organisation in some magical way.

In his book *Quiet Leadership: Winning Hearts, Minds and Matches*, Carlo Ancelotti (2016), extols the virtues of a more measured approach to leadership. This might seem an incongruous suggestion coming from a famous football or ‘soccer’ manager, to use the American parlance. They are often high-profile media stars with big personalities who can be seen ranting and raving from the touchline as their blood pressure visibly soars. Yet, Ancelotti does not see football management in terms of this familiar stereotype arguing instead that the exercise of power should be implicit and that trust and respect is the key to maintaining authority. His view cuts across different leadership contexts and are, I believe, especially pertinent in higher education where intellectual standing is crucial to the credibility of leaders shaping the extent to which they are trusted.

Yet even though introverts can make good leaders the problem is that they are less likely to put themselves forward. The reason for this appears to be that they do not anticipate that they will enjoy being a leader and all it entails including high demands for social networking, lobbying and being ‘on the stage’ so to speak. In the words of Spark and colleagues ‘introverts fail to emerge as leaders as often as extroverts because they engage in higher levels of forecasted negative affect’ (Spark et al., 2018, p. 84). They do not think they will enjoy leadership, in other words.

Academic democracy and leadership

There is a wider cost though to the way in which some academics, and perhaps not just the introverted ones, appear to find the idea of leadership unattractive. Academic democracy depends on participation. This is not just about turning up for meetings and serving on a few committees. It is about being prepared to see leadership as a responsibility or duty that is a core part of what it means to be an academic in much the same way as teaching and research. Few academics would say (or at least admit) that they do not feel ‘cut out’ for teaching or research. Leadership ought to be seen as part of the service or academic citizenship role and not separate from it.

If academics do not put themselves forward for leadership roles, then they can hardly complain about those who end up leading them. To paraphrase Plato’s warning in *The Republic*

inferiors. I believe that leadership is a responsibility and that all academics need to understand it in this way. If academics want self-governance, which nearly all do, they need to step up to the plate or this ideal will completely disappear. The alternative is that the leaders of academics will be increasingly parachuted in from the world of business and commerce even though, as Goodall (2009) showed comprehensively, the best universities are run by leading academics, not 'managers' without a deep, specialist knowledge of the higher education sector.'

So then, why is academic leadership not seen as something that everyone should be committed to in much the same way as teaching or research? Part of the answer lies in the change of language. Senior university leaders used to be referred to, and even refer to themselves humbly, as 'administrators' in a manner in which was not at all disparaging. Now, however, the operative word is 'leader' rather than 'administrator'. This up-titling reflects the way in which the assumptions of neo-liberalism and the business sector have penetrated public higher education. Being a leader, or administrator, was seen as a public duty denoting an ethos of service. This meant that situational leadership held sway. Academics who found themselves in a leadership role needed to adapt and get on with the task in hand. No one expected a natural 'born' leader to step up or indeed for anyone to claim that they were one even at quite senior levels.

Possibly the final part of the answer to this question lies in the way in which academic leadership has become synonymous with being 'one of them' rather than 'one of us': a 'manager' rather than an 'academic'. Even one of my lifelong colleagues on becoming a university vice president told me, half-jokingly, that she was 'going over to the dark side'. However, the notion of a divide between 'academics' and 'managers/leaders' has always seemed to me as one based on a mixture of exaggeration and conceptual confusion. Virtually all university leaders *are* academics in the sense of possessing high academic qualifications, such as a PhD, and normally having had a successful career as a researcher and/or teacher. They are simply wearing 'two hats'. One of the other problems that has arisen is that in some institutions, especially the post-1992 UK universities, management or leadership positions have been made permanent rather than rotating, time limited appointments. This has meant that leaders/managers have ended up wearing just 'one hat' and become, in the process, 'one of them'. When I worked for a post-1992 UK university in the early 2000s one of its systematic problems lay in the fact that the institution had created separate management contracts for academics working as leaders of large academic programmes, heads of department, as well as the senior leadership team. This was a disastrous mistake since it created a disconnected cadre of 'managers' who evaluated others on the quality of their teaching and research whilst having ceased to be judged on the quality of their own practice as academics.

Finally, I think it is worth reflecting on the role of executive search firms (ESFs) in senior and middle management appointments in recent years. To my mind this has compounded the barriers for introverts, or the simply humble and reticent, and threatens to further undermine academic democracy. The number of ESFs working with universities has grown rapidly. In 1986-87 there were 15 advertisements for vice chancellors in the British *Times Higher Education Supplement* (now the *Times Higher Education*), none of which involved an ESF. Ten years on 56 per cent of such vacancies were handled by an ESF increasing to 95 per cent by 2006-07 (Watson, 2009). While their involvement was originally confined to presidential (or vice chancellor) level searches it has now filtered downwards to the appointment of upper/middle leadership tiers including vice presidents (or pro-vice chancellors), registrars, deans, and heads of departments (Manfredi et al., 2019). The lengthening reach of ESFs is significant. These headhunters, as they are referred to colloquially, see higher education as just another service industry and have limited specialist

understanding of the sector. Upwardly mobile individuals in leadership roles find it necessary to market themselves to these firms as a 'higher education manager' and have learnt to present their expertise in terms of a contemporary portfolio of successful projects rather than that of a conventional academic (Whitchurch, 2008). Hence ESFs have played a role in shifting assumptions about what higher education leadership is and, perhaps more worryingly, control a recruitment process shrouded in secrecy. ESFs lead the search for candidates and are heavily reliant on networks of existing post-holders who they will 'reach out to', saving universities the embarrassment and hassle of being accused of poaching staff from other institutions. They are especially powerful in making recommendations to their client (i.e., the university) with respect to which candidates will be selected from the long list to form the short list (Manfredi et al., 2019). Institutions have tended to delegate too much authority to ESFs and ought to take more responsibility for ensuring that their search and appointment processes are reflective of their community's interests and fulfill a moral as well as in some contexts, such as the UK public sector, a legal duty of equality as well.

Conclusion

In this short essay I have sought to offer some reflections about academic leadership drawn in part from my own career. I believe that we need to resist the temptation to divide the leadership role from our identity as academics and celebrate the importance of being a 'situational' or 'accidental' leader. This is the norm and I think it is important to keep it this way. In the words of David Watson (2009, p.139), universities ought to be 'professionally argumentative communities with very flat structures' in which 'more or less everybody is authorized to have an opinion about everything'. This is the best description of academic democracy I know of. As professional sceptics we need to be aware that hype about transformational leadership largely involves a re-working of conventional ideas concerning the leader as a 'heroic' figure. It represents an over-reliance on the notion that leadership is about the individual rather than the group. Despite all the rhetoric about 'visions', 'transformation' and 'cultural change', what ultimately matters is what the led think about the leaders rather than how the leaders like to see and 'sell' themselves. Here I am reminded of one of the David Watson's other pearls of wisdom: only use the word 'excellence' once a year, and never about yourself!

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