

Toward distributed leadership in an academic department

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Background

The ability of organizations to adapt to change and thrive in new economic, social and economic environments is a reoccurring leadership theme. Academic units, including departments, are not insulated from change and must consider how to position themselves to respond and evolve within the specific constraints, practices, and cultures of an academic setting including tenure, shared governance, workload, service culture, and institutional mission and resources.

Leadership discourse through time has widely and most commonly focused on the heroic or great person theory. Under this theory, organizational outcomes are mostly attributed to the abilities and decision making of a positional leader that inspire or direct efforts of others in the organization. More recent lines of leadership discourse have begun to consider leadership as the outcomes driven by the network of interactions that exist in an organization. Here, individuals still play a role in leadership outcomes, but the focus of leadership development is on how the network of individuals functions and responds to change.

Distributed leadership, eco-leadership, and adaptive leadership are related ideas that primarily focus on the network of interactions in an organization as drivers of leadership outcomes.

Common elements that distinguish these concepts from others include recognizing:

1. Organizations are systems within systems, with open flows of inputs and outputs
2. The ability to detect and respond to change (adapt) is based on diversity of people and roles and how they are positioned in an organization relative to power, authority, and decision-making ability
3. Networks can drive positive and negative feedback loops
4. Positive and negative feedback loops can drive non-linear responses to change

Project identification

Through FSLI, I became increasingly interested in understanding how to incorporate portions of the ideas related to network leadership into the leadership philosophy and strategy of a relatively large and complex academic department. The Natural Resources Management and Environmental Sciences (NRES) department at Cal Poly supports over 850 students across three majors and one graduate program. The programs are delivered by 23 tenure line faculty, 10 part time lecturers, and 4 staff. Historically, the department has been administered via a department head and a range of ad hoc and standing committees.

The mission of Cal Poly is based on the polytechnic tradition of building theory and practical skills so students are ready for a professional pathway day-one after graduating. Delivering on this mission requires that our faculty routinely engage with industry and use industry input to evolve our curriculum to track changing workforce needs. The question on hand is how a diverse organization with high individual workloads can structure itself to be positioned to respond to changes so that we can continuously enhance student success through time.

Goal

The broad goal of my FSLI project was to begin to develop a more networked, distributed leadership strategy for NRES that moved away from a single department head administered model and toward a more distributed model where diverse individuals and groups were empowered and supported in diverse leadership roles in the organization. The idea is that this distributed network of leaders would provide the structure to respond to change and evolve through time.

Approach

Through the last three plus years, our organization assessed major nodes required to sense and respond to change. Broadly, nodes established thus far include areas of industry engagement and curricular alignment, student success, resource allocation, advancement and alumni relations, risk and safety, student leadership, and prospective student engagement. We designed a leadership structure for each node. In some cases, the leadership node consisted of one faculty or staff, in other cases it was a team of faculty and staff or pairs of faculty and staff. Sometimes a routine committee structure was used. In all cases we evaluated the resources, power and authority required for the node to function and worked to support those needs.

Outcomes

Over the last two years we successfully established a series of leadership nodes including:

- **Program leads:** A faculty that is charged with facilitating the integration of all aspects of curriculum design, industry engagement, student advising and student success within a major. We have a formal position description and application process for this role and faculty received course buy-out to take on this role. Prior to these positions integration across these dimensions was low and faculty engagement with industry was limited.
- **Budget and resource committee:** This consists of three faculty and four staff with delegated authority to assess resource use and future needs and serve as the liaison across the entire department to formulate recommendations and procedures to make decisions around resource allocation.
- **Advancement and alumni engagement:** A staff member, department head and a college advancement team member work together to develop a department advancement and alumni engagement strategy. The staff leads development of timelines and communications in coordination with college advancement team and college teamwork with the department head to implement strategy.
- **Prospective student engagement:** A faculty and staff work together to lead all aspects of engagement with prospective students, including open house, parent/supporter weekend, and student welcome fall term.
- **Student leadership:** Two faculty and one staff implement our student L.E.A.D scholars program which provides stipends and professional growth opportunities to cohorts of students each year.
- **Risk and safety:** We have integrated risk and safety management across two staff and a faculty position in response to a student safety audit. This team created a new risk and safety management system and are the liaison to university risk and safety.
- **Fire sciences curriculum:** One faculty leads innovation in this space, receiving additional buy-out time from department head and charged with innovating curriculum

and engaging partners. From this effort the first prescribed fire course ever was established at Cal Poly

Obstacles

As we move toward distributed leadership some common obstacles include faculty buy-in, individual variation in interest or approach to leading, tyranny of the urgent, and trade-offs associated with time and focus. While distributed leadership focuses on the network of interactions, individuals and individual behaviors, beliefs and attitudes are part of the network.

Institutional changes also have been barriers. Our institution has adopted a range of initiative with varying degree of faculty buy-in which have drained time and energy from our department goals.

Future plans

In most cases my future plans are to continue to refine the functioning of each node and to examine opportunities to bring new individuals into these roles. There is still substantial need to bring industry input into how our department and curriculum function and we have a long way to go to get to the point where the interactions and relationships are self-sustaining and an ingrained part of our culture and expectation of the faculty.

How FSLI supported the project

FSLI supported this project in many ways. At a fundamental level, assessment tools to help me understand myself and others were key to moving a shared vision forward. This was the first time I engaged in deep quantitative assessment of how I work and how others work. The communication tools exercises were essential for illuminating the benefits and needs to share information across broad groups and how unintentional processes could make different people feel isolated. Finally, the professional networks and executive coaching were foundational to helping me work through institutional and project specific challenges and for finding a support system that extends well beyond my institution.