

Leadership in Business Schools: Contributions from Traditional Leadership Approaches

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Abstract: For many years, leadership in universities and business schools has been investigated and explored (see Thomas 2011). Many changes and new requirements from a variety of stakeholders have arisen. For instance, there has been an increased focus on impact from the state, companies, and organizations and a greater need to obtain external funding for research projects. Additionally, current debates regarding sustainability and digitalization and the prevalence of mission-based research have made it necessary to revisit the challenges inherent in leading universities and business schools. It is relevant to revisit traditional approaches to leadership to explore how these concepts and factors can inspire the development of business school leadership. This article is not a comprehensive literature review of the leadership differences that business schools face. Rather, we present recent literature on leadership in business schools that, in combination with our own experiences as part of a management team in a newly established business school in Denmark, showcases the contemporary challenges faced in business school leadership. We use traditional leadership approaches to discuss how business school leadership can benefit from these approaches to confront new challenges and requirements.

Keywords: Leadership; Academic leadership; Business School;

1. What makes business schools different?

In the last 40–50 years, many new business schools have been established, and their relevance and importance have increased. At the same time, there has been increased attention to the contributions that business schools can provide. Business schools are facing new demands on how they are run, which has placed new challenges and requirements on business school leadership. In order to run a business school, a management team must acknowledge the unique ways a business school functions while also considering a variety of stakeholders. As indicated below, there are many areas in which a business school functions differently from traditional organizations:

1.1 Ambidexterity of output

Business schools produce a multiplicity of intangible “products” across both short, middle–long, and long terms, including

- education at the bachelor’s and master’s level (short term),
- research and dissemination of current challenges and problems in organizations, and in society in general (middle–long term), and
- research and foresight regarding future challenges and problems in organizations and in society in general (long term).

A peculiar fact is that most employees in a business school must focus on short-, middle–long-, and long-term activities while at the same time confronting the challenge of ambidexterity. The challenge of ambidexterity also concerns the process of leading to incentivize and manage these interdependent activities.

1.2 Need for interdisciplinarity

Every researcher or research group has a research focus and agenda within a specific field of expertise. However, it is increasingly evident that solving today’s wicked problems calls for interdisciplinarity. An inherent challenge is that researchers are encouraged to become specialized in their research area and develop a so-called “T-profile,” as the most prestigious journals only accept papers with specialist content. Conversely, external foundations and state governments put pressure on business schools to help solve societal problems through interdisciplinary research. In addition, researchers often find that mission-based research, the scope of external

funding, and an increased focus on impact limit their freedom to research. Leadership must balance these conflicting agendas and the diversity of the involved stakeholders while maintaining faculty motivation and enthusiasm to work.

1.3 Differences in work conditions between the supporting staff and faculty

The challenge of coping with substantial differences between the administrative support staff and the faculty is not new. Work conditions can vary, as faculty can, to a great extent, work from home, go to conferences, and participate in research projects. Therefore, faculty members often have highly flexible work conditions. The work conditions for administrative support staff are more traditional, with many fixed assignments that often require being physically present at the office. Consequently, different leadership styles are required at the same time to manage two different working groups.

1.4 Conflicting demands from different stakeholders

The faculty must teach on a basic level to undergraduates and on an applied level to executives. They must also conduct both in-depth research in their research area and broader interdisciplinary research, apply for external funding, and disseminate their findings both to peers and to society in general. This can be confusing and difficult to prioritize and can result in a feeling of insufficiency, especially for those on fixed contracts and those without tenure.

1.5 Administrative demands from the university, the state, and external funds

Both state governments and the surrounding community expect business schools to demonstrate high quality across all activities. One way to ensure quality is through accreditation, both from the state and from well-known accreditation institutions. The need for accreditation gives rise to a significant increase in the administrative burden. Regular quality control and a large number of evaluation criteria render the administrative role in a business school cumbersome and difficult to streamline together with the faculty (Kundu 2020).

1.6 Development rather than disruption: the pace of change

Business schools, and especially universities, are large, conservative institutions. They change very slowly and try to maintain an exalted aura often associated with the concept of the “ivory tower.” Universities and business schools have, nevertheless, undergone major changes, both in the number of degree programs offered, the activities available to researchers, and the way the institution as a whole is managed.

1.7 Lack of experience with professional leaders

25 years ago faculty in most universities and business schools elected their leaders democratically. In many departments, the top position previously passed to those that were “next in line” rather than to the most skilled leaders among the faculty. The Head of Department position was passed to the next person in line. There was not much respect for the top position, and the department was managed by the strongest professors among the faculty. The implementation of professional leadership, therefore, represents a major shift in the way business schools operate.

1.8 Implementation of performance management

The last key point concerns the significant burden of measurements and control mechanisms that have been implemented to ensure the quality of education and research output and to establish more precise promotion criteria for the faculty. These control mechanisms put significant pressure on the individual faculty member and can create a feeling of constant monitoring. Leadership must cope with this challenge and help the faculty remain motivated despite the consequences of New Public Management entering the business school.

Business schools are facing many issues of which leadership must be aware, and leaders must find solutions to cope with these challenges alongside the faculty and the supporting staff (Ong 2012). To identify how leaders of business schools can mitigate these challenges and work proactively on the issues, we revisit the traditional leadership literature and propose areas for further exploration.

2. Short definition of leadership

Leadership has been defined in many ways over the years. In 1957, Hemphill and Coons wrote: “Leadership is *‘the behavior of an individual ... directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal’*” (Hemphill and Coons 1957, p. 7). Later, this definition was developed and expanded:

“Leadership is about articulating visions, embodying values, and creating the environment within which things can be accomplished” (Richards and Engle 1986, p. 206) or

Leadership is *“the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organization ...”* (House et al. 1999, p. 184).

A distinction has also been made between management and leadership. Traditionally, management has been associated with planning, budgeting, organizing, and controlling, while leadership has been concerned with setting a direction, managing change, and motivating people (Kotter 1990). When we discuss leadership in business schools, it includes both concepts. In our view, leadership includes both influencing the organization and ensuring that the organization is prepared to meet challenges in the future. Leadership is a specialized role and a social influence process that, in most cases, is performed by a group of leaders.

Inspired by the leadership of private companies, New Public Management (NPM) has been introduced as a way to achieve the goals and desired outcomes of business schools. As a result, leadership in business schools is deviating from the well-known academic leadership approach that has been described as distributed leadership, in which leaders must create and protect environments encouraging academic work, support and develop academic values and identity, and promote collaboration between individuals and research groups. The introduction of NPM has changed the focus to a more fragmented leadership style that involves increasingly formalized management structures, performance measurements, and management based on marked principles of competition between universities and business schools for attracting students, researchers, and funding.

The challenge of leading business schools is to conduct research at a high academic level, offer programs that enable students to make a difference in society and collaborate with companies, organizations, and society in general to maximize impact. This must be undertaken while combining the need for leading researchers and teachers to strive for the highest level of research, teaching, and making an impact while meeting the requirements of the state and other stakeholders to ensure high quality in all areas of the business school. Leadership in business schools must, therefore, contain elements from both traditional management tasks and traditional leadership perspectives. Our aim is to investigate how these two approaches can be combined and to suggest possible ways for leaders to integrate them so they can handle leadership regarding the special circumstances business schools are facing.

3. The contribution of traditional leadership approaches in a business school context

In general, three types of variables characterize the traditional leadership approach: characteristics of the leader, characteristics of the follower, and characteristics of the situation. These variables are described in the research on leadership as leader traits and skills, leader behavior and roles, power in leadership, situational leadership, strategic leadership, and some newer approaches to leadership, which include transformational, charismatic, and ethical leadership. In the following section, we will briefly describe the different approaches and relate them to leadership in business schools.

3.1 Leader traits and skills

The leader trait and skills approach is one of the oldest ways to describe leadership. The Big Five traits (conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism; see Digman 1990) are still relevant and important today as aspects of business school leadership. Conscientiousness indicates high levels of thoughtfulness and goal-directed behaviors. Conscientious people are organized and mindful of details, and they consider how their behavior affects others. This trait is highly relevant for leadership in business schools, as the focus is increasingly on achieving specific goals based on the needs of students and society. There must be a strategy and a plan for fulfilling it.

Another important trait is openness. Leaders with this trait are curious about the world and eager to learn new things and enjoy new experiences. As many new requirements and demands challenge business schools, there is a need for imagination and experimentation to determine new ways to live up to the often-conflicting terms and conditions.

Extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism remain important aspects of leadership. In business schools, however, it can be more difficult to find people with these characteristics or traits. Experts like professors can

be quite introverted, and they are often narrowly focused on their own research area and on being the expert (Stiles 2004), thus challenging the notion of agreeableness.

Leadership skills are traditionally divided into three categories known as the three-factor taxonomy of broadly defined skills: technical, interpersonal, and conceptual (Hirst et al. 2004).

Technical knowledge of methods, processes, the organization, and the organization's product and service are acquired through formal education, experience, and job training. As many leaders of business schools primarily acquire research and teaching experiences before they get a job as a manager, they tend to lack technical skills as leaders.

The need for collaboration between diverse research areas and interests indicates that interpersonal and conceptual skills are very important. Establishing effective relationships through tact, diplomacy, and listening skills can be a challenge; the manager must set aside their own research interests and examine the whole picture of the business school. Leaders must also generate creative solutions to conflicting interests.

Leader traits and skills are highly relevant for the leaders of a business school. The lack of professional leadership in business schools makes it vital that incoming and appointed leaders acquire leadership competencies and skills. It is paradoxical that business school leaders are often professors who have acquired their position because they are skilled at digging deep into a very narrow subject using specific research methods to acquire useful information and results. These are not the skills necessary to be a successful business school leader.

3.2 Leadership behavior and roles

It has posed a major challenge in leadership research to determine which behavior categories are meaningful and relevant for classifying managerial activities. As Mintzberg (1973) argues, the roles of managers can be examined across a taxonomy of 10 managerial roles that are divided into three overall categories: information processing roles, decision-making roles, and interpersonal roles.

Information processes roles: Due to the increasing demands of impact and dissemination that have been placed upon business schools, leaders must focus on the roles of disseminator and spokesperson. The practice of monitoring information from a variety of sources must be transformed into relevant activities and initiatives in the business school and in collaboration with external partners.

Decision-making roles: The disturbance handler role has become increasingly vital, not only because of the increasing demands on business schools but also due to COVID-19 and other unforeseen events. Business school leaders have been forced to make many changes and even act in accordance with the entrepreneurial role in some cases in the form of crisis management. The resource allocator role and the negotiator role are currently in use and will remain necessary in the future. Business schools' dependence on external funding and the states' focus on how resources are used require that leaders enter fully into the negotiator role and attempt to reach the optimal outcome during negotiations.

Interpersonal roles: In order to fulfill and promote the purpose of the business school, its leadership must ensure that employees are motivated. This includes hiring the "right" people and training, directing, and promoting them. All of these managerial activities ensure that the business school meets its obligations. By establishing and maintaining relationships with individuals and groups outside the business school, such as through alumni activities and by participating in different networks, leaders can keep the business school on track. Therefore, the liaison role plays a significant part in leadership.

The challenge for the business school leader is that self-leadership is prevalent among researchers, and they are often expected to create their own academic environments centered around their research and teaching. Therefore, the central role of the business school leader is to create a framework around the researchers that can support their publishing, funding, and teaching efforts. For this reason, the business school leader must also accept that they are not necessarily the expert in getting papers published or applying for external funding. This reality requires the business school leader to manage a variety of roles, including both outward- and inward-looking decision-making roles and outward- and inward-looking interpersonal roles.

3.3 Power in leadership

The balance of power in business schools has changed dramatically. With the introduction of professional leadership and an increase in control systems, power has shifted from personal power to position power. Previously, the most prominent professors, who built a group of researchers around them, had the power to allocate resources and decide the agenda of a research group. By virtue of their expertise and ability to establish a community, they acquired referent power, as people wanted to participate in the community, and followers expressed admiration and loyalty to the professor.

Now that leadership has been institutionalized and professionalized, charismatic leaders can still strengthen their power, but position power plays a much more important role. Legitimate, reward, coercive, and information powers are prevalent (French and Raven 1968). The view of leadership as a profession has increased the significance of leadership, and the appointed leaders exercise an increased level of power, which is allocated from the top level of universities or from the board of directors. In many cases, coercive power is still limited, as it remains difficult to lay off faculty who do not perform or behave properly. The university systems or educational environments that business schools are part of have not kept abreast of the implementation of professional management.

Another issue is that position power can be difficult to apply to highly charismatic professors who exercise great personal power outside the leadership team. In such situations, it is necessary to find other ways to handle the risk of conflicting demands from different internal and external stakeholders.

3.4 Situational leadership (Team leadership)

Situational leadership, or contingency theory, has been the basis of much of the leadership literature for many years. The idea that the leader's most important task is to smooth the path to help employees reach their goals, taking into account their motivation toward a task or relationship (House 1996), is still relevant in business schools. Faculty members often complain that they lack time to conduct research. With all of the new and conflicting tasks the faculty must take into account, this lack of consistent research time represents a deficiency. Leadership should, therefore, focus on planning for teaching and administration in a way that promotes sufficient research time.

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) specified appropriate leadership behavior based on an employee's ability and confidence to perform a task. Again, this concept can be transferred to leadership in business schools, where young and inexperienced researchers and teachers must learn the profession and receive differentiated treatment according to their approach and attitude toward their tasks.

Many business schools are organized into different forms (e.g., research groups, research centers, or departments). It is, therefore, necessary for leaders to manage teams and identify the key determinants of team performance. The focus on following a mission-based strategy implies that every team must find a way to participate in the missions. Leadership must communicate regarding the missions and support the teams' efforts to contribute. The framework must be broad, but there may be some goals on the business school level that every research group must share.

A business school employs a diverse pool of employees. The researchers can have flexible working days and times in which they do not have to be present at the business school. This is quite different for the supporting administrative staff. It is often necessary for them to be present on campus, and they do not have the same flexibility. This can be a challenge for the business school leader, who may have employees working under a variety of different conditions.

Another situational leadership challenge is managing employees as individuals while at the same time promoting collaboration and attachment to a large and broad research group. This situation can give rise to rivalry and sub-optimization, and it can be difficult to navigate in terms of leadership. This team focus could also be relevant to the leadership team in a business school. Depending on the management structure, some business schools are managed by a group of leaders. This arrangement can challenge the leaders' ability to participate in and lead a management group of faculty and support administrative staff with diverging foci and a wide range of expertise.

3.5 Strategic leadership

Interest in strategic leadership has increased for all organizations, especially among top executives (Cannella and Monroe 1997). Strategic leadership is also highly relevant for business schools (Howard et al. 2012). Understanding how executives can transform an organization to deal with globalization, competition, technological changes, and requirements from society is very important. The challenges are extensive, and the need for control is high for some aspects (e.g., regarding the quality of the outcome). However, for other aspects, the need for control is low or medium (e.g., regarding the research and teaching processes and the way research groups conduct their work). Leadership must determine the balance between high and low control within the organization.

Formulating and implementing strategy is, therefore, one of the most important ways leaders can make a difference (Nahavandi 1993). Direct decisions, the allocation of resources, reward systems, the selection of other leaders and employees, promotions, and role modeling are all processes that can affect the most important determinants for the organization: the environment, the strategy, the structure, the culture, the technology, and the leadership. Leadership in business schools must attend to these factors in order to establish the agenda and meet all necessary requirements.

Business schools, in particular, differ from other types of organizations when it comes to the ambidexterity of output and the need for interdisciplinarity. With so many diverse stakeholders, business school leaders must maintain a broad overview and a holistic mindset to capture the needs and desires of all stakeholders. This aim must be reflected in the strategy and how the strategy is implemented.

3.6 Charismatic, transformational, and authentic leadership

The newest models for leadership are charismatic, transformational, and authentic (or ethical) leadership (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang 2015). Charisma is not a new phenomenon, but combined with followers' emotional reactions to leadership, the concept can bring some new insights to the field. The same applies to authentic leadership. There are many forms of charismatic leadership, but some focus more heavily on the manager's own strengths and how to develop them. It is not a new concept that a way to be an effective leader is to be authentic and aware of why one is a leader (the purpose) and to pursue solid values, connect with the followers, and demonstrate self-discipline. If one is also charismatic, one has a good chance of being an excellent leader.

Transformational behaviors seem to align well with the leadership needs of business schools. Transformational leadership is characterized by finding the optimal way to influence an organization (without dictating), making individualized considerations, motivating followers in an inspirational way, and stimulating followers intellectually. Within a mission-driven organization, it is possible to articulate a clear and appealing vision. The vision must be communicated to the individual groups and employees in the organization. In order to achieve this aim, leaders must express confidence in their followers to establish the framework for the implementation of the vision and the strategy.

When implementing changes such as performance management in traditional and conservative organizations such as business schools, a leader must balance strategic considerations with researchers' needs for self-leadership. In such cases, a transformational and authentic leadership style is required, along with patience and a realistic view of the pace of change.

4. Need for further research

Traditional leadership approaches are, in many ways, relevant for leadership in business schools today. However, with the changes in the expectations of business schools, the changing composition of internal and external stakeholders, and the growing demand for the professionalization of leadership, it is clear that many aspects of a business school differ from those of traditional organizations. The circumstances faced by business schools have changed dramatically over the last 20 years. The focus has shifted from a traditionally research-based view toward increasingly output-oriented demands. Business schools are facing new business models and increasingly mission-based thinking regarding the expected outcomes and inherent impact of the business school.

Overall, business schools are facing new and potentially contradicting demands, and the interactions between individuals, organizations, and bureaucratic politics are therefore vital. Consequently, business school leaders

must strengthen their focus on the development of personal and communication skills and the practice of strategic leadership. These changes will be challenging for the individual leader and for team-based leadership. In addition, the pace of change will be a point of focus for many business school leadership teams.

These considerations underline the need for further research to identify how business schools differ from other organizations as a precondition for exploring how to best respond to the new requirements that business school leaders face. While the ambidexterity of output and the need for interdisciplinarity, together with differences in work conditions between the faculty and administrative staff, are obvious points of difference, there is also a need to contextualize the challenges and explore the potential options for utilizing these differences to create stronger organizations. Second, it is relevant to uncover different ways to handle the challenges and the variety of circumstances business schools are facing, both through traditional leadership approaches (as presented above) and through other complementary perspectives. Lastly, it is relevant to examine traditional leadership approaches to add relevant perspectives and expand the number of available approaches. These measures can offer inspiration on how to lead business schools in the new era of prerequisites, demands, and expectations.

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