Title : Attributes of Academic Leaders: The Missing Element in Indian Perspective

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to assess the role specific key attributes of academic leaders and determine the missing attribute(s) in current generation of academic leaders in India. With changing market scenario and evolving stakeholder demands of the education system, academic leaders are required to perform a wide array of roles and responsibilities. This paper explores whether Indian academic leaders are ready for the changing market scenario or need to develop a different set of attributes to lead respective academic institutions efficiently.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach: Existing research on leadership attributes and academic leaders was reviewed to develop a framework indicating academic leader attributes and the missing element required to lead academic institutions.

Findings: This research paper identifies agility and nimbleness as the missing attributes in academic leaders, due to years of conditioning of academic ecosystem. Leaders with this attribute are recommended as better suited for leading education institutes to future industry expectations and student needs.

Practical Implications: Academic institutions undergoing transformation and expansion require academic leaders who are well equipped to handle market conditions and the ecosystem disruption being caused by technology. This paper will help them identify appropriate leaders to lead their institutions.

Originality & Value: This paper has attempted to determine the role based attributes which are desired in academic leaders and identify the missing attributes which need to be developed in academic leaders for future readiness.

Key words: Academic leaders, leadership, attributes, academics, agility

Paper type: Viewpoint Paper

Introduction:

Indian Education system has been steadily progressing towards Education 2.0, even though it is still significantly lagging behind Industry 4.0. With trends like data analytics, robotics process automation, cloud content management, Learning Management system and digital marketing, etc. gaining prominence in education sector; formalizing academic leadership has become the need of the hour.

Traditionally, academic leaders are those who are groomed within the education system. They have usually seen the academic and administrative processes for years, dealt with both internal and external stakeholders and acquired expertise over academic administration. Their managerial style and leadership attributes are often dependent on their own interest areas and this significantly affects the culture of the institutions they lead.

But education industry is shaping into a different entity altogether and is no longer held responsible for knowledge dissemination only. As per the 2018 sector report by Indian Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), with 34.82% of the sector being comprised of Private Universities, education sector is evolving like any other privatized sector and becoming more performance centric.

All the other secondary and tertiary industries expect the inception of innovation and the burden of Research and Development to be carried by the education sector. Furthermore, the students who are pursuing professional courses for higher education are not just interested in the degree. With more than 37 million students enrolled in higher education programs in 2018 (IBEF, 2018) and in pipeline for recruitment into various industries, the need for employment enhancing skills to be inherent to professional education courses is being acutely felt by all stakeholders.

As educational institutions need to change dynamically and adapt to industry trends as well as in-coming generation of Gen Z learners, there is need for academic leaders who are capable of handling volatile times ahead. Institutions are on lookout for academic leaders who are not just celebrated academicians with strong intellectual bent but are also capable of running institutions with thousands of stakeholders involved.

This paper explores the most desirable attributes for Academic leaders& the missing element in the profiles of Academic leaders today. A good understanding of these attributes can not only help institutional management to identify right leaders, but also train existing leaders for more efficient handling of their duties.

Attributes of Leaders

There is a combination of attributes that are either inherent to or are cultivated in leaders. These attributes allow the leaders to function in their roles and lead organizations on the path of success. Upon critical evaluation, these attributes can be defined as -

Vision & Strategic Planning

According to Kurniawan A.W., Puspitaningtyas Z. (2013), a leader must have the ability to visualize the direction in which the organization is required to move and must also be able to visualize a destination. With clear vision, a leader can plan the strategies needed to drive employee performance and organizational growth. Furthermore, this attribute allows for the leader to decide which projects to pursue and which to avoid.

Influence & Charisma

A leader needs to not only envision the growth path for the organization but also communicate it effectively to his/her team. As there can often be resistance to ideas and process changes within the organization, a leader needs to have a natural charisma and influential personality to make people see things his way.

A charismatic leader is able to induce better buy-in of ideas and is also able to lead from the front, as his/her team is loyal and committed to organizational objectives.

Dominance & Decision Making

While a leader must be influential and strive for organizational objectives to be accepted by the team, at times a leader is also required to exercise dominance and make hard decisions. Certain organizational targets and goals need to be driven in a time bound manner and a leader has to exercise command over the team to ensure compliance and productivity of all employees.

Empowerment & Mentoring

An effective leader also has to empower his team members, mentoring and creating future leaders (Kurniawan A.W., Puspitaningtyas Z., 2013). By empowering team members and holding them accountable for organizational objectives, a leader can create a team of managers and leaders who can sustain the performance and growth of the organization.

At the same time, this can move an organization away from people dependence towards role and process dependence.

Roles & Duties of Academic Leaders

While leadership attributes remain same across sectors and organizations, the extent to which an attribute is more valued in a leader can change as per the sector and organizational environment in which the leader is operating.

An academic leader's roles and duties are varied in nature and demands certain leadership attributes to be more pronounced than others. Key roles of an academic leader are –

- **Administration:** Academic leaders have to participate in cyclic administrative activities, which are dependent on the academic cycle of admissions, academic operations, examinations and graduation. In higher education, academic leaders have to be

accountable for research and placements related activities as well. These administrative activities require –

- o **Planning & Strategy:** Determining the resources and process requirements for academic administration, prior to academic year commencement.
- o **Execution:** Daily operations of academic activities involving training delivery, formative and summative assessments, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- o **Feedback:** Stakeholder feedback collection and analysis to take corrective actions and improve administrative processes.
- o **Review:** Reviewing all academic administration processes for future planning and process improvement.

This requires an **academic leader to be process oriented** as well as have moderately high compliance and steadiness in personality for ensuring daily administrative execution.

- ● **Quality Control & Review:**Academic leaders are required to have a broad understanding of different domains, thus enabling them to conduct content and delivery review, as well as install quality control measures in place.

This requires an academic leader to be a generalist, rather than being a specialist.Additionally, to conduct quality review and install control measures, academic leaders may have to exercise dominance over their peers and subordinates.

- ● **Research and Industrial connect:** Planning, facilitating and participating in research and consulting activities of the institute is an also an essential role of academic leaders. Not only does it require subject matter expertise, it also requires clarity of process for successful completion of quality research and consulting.

Academic leaders have to contribute as an individual researcher as well as create a research environment in the institution to lead the team towards quality research output.

- ● **People management:**As academic leaders operate in an organizational ecosystem that has people of varied age groups and generations working together, they require strong inter-personal skills and ability to manage people from diverse backgrounds effectively.

Academic leaders may need to develop multiple managerial styles and transition between them to suit the needs of Gen Z and Millennial students as well as Gen X and Gen Y knowledge workers (i.e. professors, researchers and staff) of the institute.

All these roles and duties give rise to a specific set of leadership attributes among academic leaders. While some of these resultant attributes may be desirable in today's evolving education industry, others may not be. The following framework is developed to indicate the roles and duties of academic leaders and the desired attributes in them.

Fig. 1. Framework to indicate development of desired attributes for Academic Leadership Roles from versatile set of duties performed by the leaders:
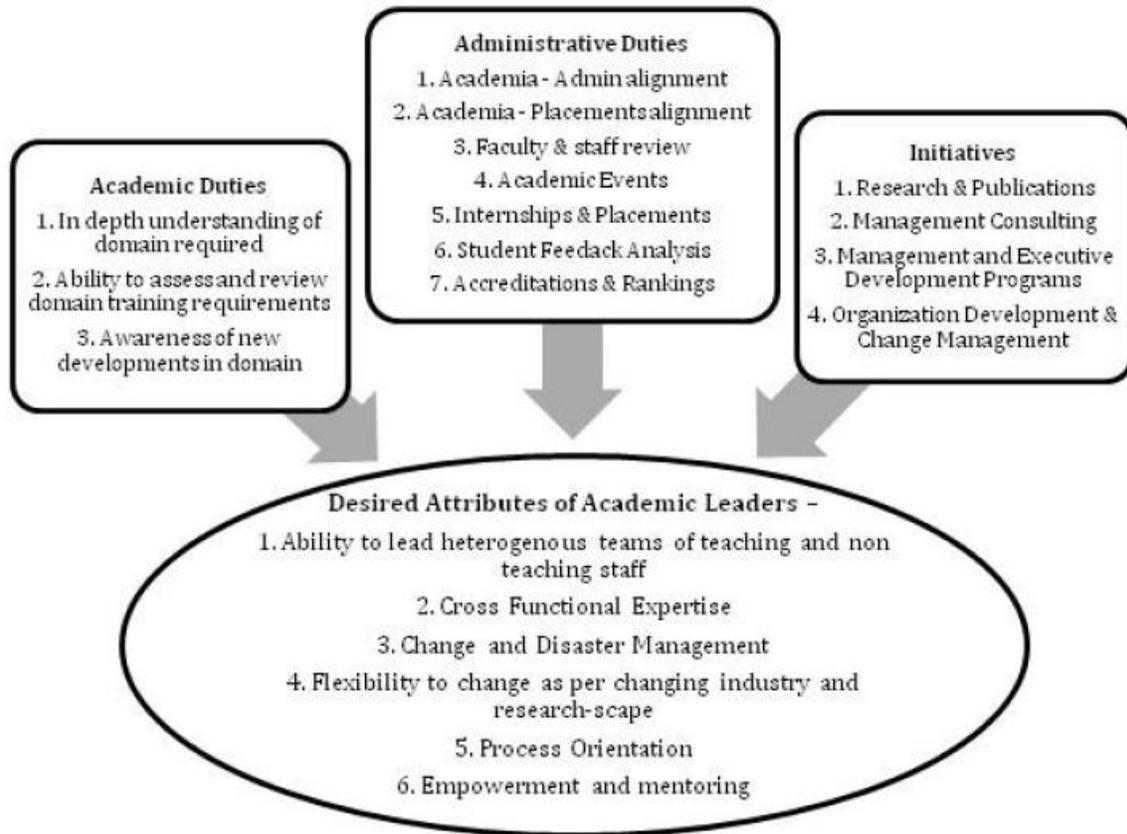
Trends evolving in Education Sector

While the roles and responsibilities of academic leaders are giving rise to a certain set of desired leadership attributes, there are certain supply side and demand side trends in the education sector that are transforming the focus on education quality and accessibility. These key trends are directly responsible for identification of the missing element in current Academic Leadership in India.

Blended Learning

Blended learning is the use of face to face and online training instruction in an integrated manner. Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004) state that blended learning has the potential for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of learning experience for students. This means that educational institutions have to increasingly invest in ICT infrastructure to facilitate blended learning within the classroom, as well as invest in developing faculty talent to create blended learning experiences.

From an academic leadership perspective, this requires strategic vision and planning in the academic leaders, as well as adaptability to this new age concept of learning. While traditionally, the use of online medium for improving training efficiency has been frowned upon in Indian education institutions, current academic leaders have to be more welcoming towards this approach.

Flipped Classroom

As per Tucker, B. (2012), Flipped Classroom has gained prominence among leading educational institutions as the desired approach of training and instruction. Flipped classroom approach transfers the domain instruction component of learning to students prior to the classroom engagement, which in turn is reserved for working on problems, advanced conceptual discussion and engagement of students in collaborative learning.

As this training approach leads to more successful skill development in students, this is also becoming a more preferred way of learning among the new generation of learners pursuing professional courses at higher education level.

Process Digitization (Learning Management System)

As the training delivery and training content accessibility been upgrading through blended learning and flipped classroom approaches, the other academic and administrative processes of an academic institution are also undergoing digitization and automation. Most private higher education institutions in India are in various phases of Learning Management System adoption and even public institutions are slowly progressing towards process automation.

This means that academic leaders have to enable admission, placements, examination, internal assessment and other processes within the institution to be automated to improve efficiency and organizational productivity. Not only should the academic leader be comfortable with technology adoption, but should also be able to manage change within the organization and facilitate smooth technological adoption by all internal stakeholders.

The Missing Element in Academic Leadership

The aforementioned roles and duties evolve from various set of activities performed and responsibilities assumed by academic leaders during their career progression. By managing students and peers for academic delivery, evaluations, joint research activities and co-curricular activities; academic leaders born in the system cultivate a diverse set of attributes.

However, as the education sector is transforming, traditionally groomed leaders may not be well equipped to lead educational institution towards Education 2.0 and beyond. Technology adoption in academic processes and preference for new learning approaches by students has transformed the way educational institutions are run. Thus traditionally groomed academic leaders have to adapt to this changed scenario and drive their organizations for the same.

Bryman (2009) recognized institutional change and the leader's impact on driving institutional change as a significant factor in determining an academic leader's effectiveness. While change should not be imposed and should rather be democratically installed in place, it may often not be the case in academic institutions. Fast changing external environment and industry needs are forcing institutions to adapt at a fast pace as well.

But most academic leaders who have grown in the traditional Indian education system are struggling to match the stakeholder expectations, let alone institutionalize change. Several higher education institutions in the past decade have, therefore, failed to maintain sustainable growth and have either reduced their operations or have shut down. This leads us to the key missing element in academic leaders in India, and that is **Agility**.

Agile Leadership in Academia

McKenzie, J., & Aitken, P. (2012) recognize the importance and impact which leadership agility can have on a knowledgeable organization. And since an educational institution can clearly be categorized as a knowledgeable organization with a majority of employees contributing as knowledge workers, academic leadership must have agility.

As leadership agility can create a conducive environment for collaborative learning and knowledge sharing, agile academic leadership could mean improved research and knowledge dissemination culture within academic institutions. Furthermore, agile academic leaders can also better respond to the need for development of programs with integrated blended learning and flipped classroom approach.

Practical Implications for Academic institutions

Current academic environment and the structure within which academic leaders operate, encourages stability and steadiness in a leader's personality. While academic leaders have to manage change and develop their organizations simultaneously, their affinity towards change adoption and spearheading change is limited.

An agile and nimble leader on the other hand can not only react to market changes, but also build an institution that is predictive and proactive in nature. According to Leybourn, E. (2013), Agile leaders eliminate challenges and impediments from the process, allowing for achievement of scheduled objectives and budgets.

To keep a competitive pace, educational institutions require academic leaders who are agile, thus empowering the internal stakeholders to achieve the program objectives and the vision of respective educational institution. If academic leaders are either hired for their agility or are encouraged to develop agility as an attribute, academic institutions can benefit in long run by development of future ready institutions.

These institutions will be able to adapt to the coming generations of Gen Z learners who will be seeking flipped classroom and digital learning platforms. At the same time, agile academic leaders will be able to maximize performance of millennial teaching and non teaching staff to achieve desired institutional goals.

However, this would mean that academic institutions will have to make a shift in their leadership recruitment and training practices. Academic institutions can adopt the practice of identifying '**Agility'** attribute in current and future leaders by the following approaches –

1. **Psychometric and behavioral assessments** becoming part of the leadership development and recruitment process
2. **Self assessment of agility among academic leaders** to be promoted for identification of training and development need
3. **Institutional Leadership development programs for departmental leaders** with increased focus on building attitudinal agility and nimbleness
4. **Facilitating career accession** of departmental leaders on the basis of **adaptation to changing organizational and market scenario**
5. **Evaluating** a potential leader's **fitment to role on the basis of transformation process changes** installed by the leader in place
6. **Assessing leader's ability to comprehend technological developments** (in terms of process digitization and automation) in academic administrative processes and adopting it with a vision

Agile leaders in academic institutions can be the game changers for education sector. A traditionally stable education sector now requires institutions that are in sync with external market forces and evolve continually. Academic institutions should therefore be seeking and retaining academic leaders who have natural agility to develop organization processes and structure.

In conclusion, it can be said that with agile academic leaders in place, education sector will not be tagging along at the tail end of industry 4.0, but would rather be contributing towards digital and technological transformations in the industry. While agility remains a missing element in the key attributes of academic leaders, it is currently the most desirable attribute and should be sought after in leaders for academic institutions.

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