Leadership in Academia

Building Leadership Capacity

By: Anna Stuart, Vice President, Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette

Universities are complex organizations that require specific leadership capabilities. But while each university is very different from the next, there is one commonality in academic institutions from St. John’s to Victoria - the increasing struggle to fill leadership roles. The demands placed on academic administrative leaders have increased significantly as they are asked to do more with less. From a pure numbers perspective, the number of qualified candidates with the experience needed for these roles has declined over the past few years. Universities overall have done little to develop leadership capacity both inside and outside of their walls. In short, a perfect storm has been brewing for the past several years that will impact the future search for academic leaders.

While the situation is becoming challenging, that is not to say that it is desperate. There are ways to expand the current candidate pool, but it will require a shift in how we think about university leadership. For example, we need to start considering candidates who show leadership potential versus proven leadership experience. Broadening the search to include international candidates is another area of expansion. But these are merely two stop-gap solutions. To ensure long term and continued success, it is time for universities to start actively building leadership capacity internally.

Proactive development of leadership capacity starts with defining leadership profiles for academic administrative leadership positions. While some of the required competencies are the same across institutions – like influence and persuasion skills and resilience, for example – some competencies will reflect the unique characteristics of the university and the leadership role itself. These unique competencies are determined based on the most significant internal and external challenges facing the university. Other factors to consider are opportunities impacting the university and the role and the strategy for the university and department including the key projects, initiatives and changes ahead. For example, a growing university might need its leaders to have strong competencies for risk taking and innovation while a smaller university might be better served by leaders who are more collaborative and creative in their approach to leadership.

Developing leadership capacity takes time and there is no right approach. Instead, universities need to adopt a range of strategies including traditional courses, seminars, workshops, and development assignments. Increasingly, executive coaching and mentoring are being used in the university context to provide more targeted development for potential and new leaders. As the developing leadership cadre grows, peer networks or communities of practice both within the university and across universities become cost-effective approaches for inclusion in the leadership development program.

Anna Stuart is a Vice President at Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette, Atlantic Canada’s leading human capital solutions firm. This white paper represents the collective opinions expressed during a series of academic roundtable discussions held in 2012, hosted by Anna Stuart, Dr. Ross Paul, former president of Laurentian and Windsor Universities, and Dr. Peter George, president emeritus of McMaster University.
By far the most important leadership development strategy is feedback and discussion. Deliberately and actively identifying the kind of leadership that is required and ensuring that it is happening and being developed is essential to successfully developing leadership capacity. Of course, this is far easier said than done. In our experience, it’s not that leaders withhold feedback, but that they are unsure or uncomfortable with how to deliver it. Giving performance feedback will likely be a new behaviour for existing leaders and will require some adjustment and development. These conversations can feel awkward and uncomfortable at first, but are invaluable to developing leadership capacity. Feedback, both positive and constructive, is the only way to know whether we are on the right track, or could serve to adjust the course slightly.

Universities are facing significant challenges, and the ability to adapt will be essential to future success. While the pool of qualified external candidates continues to lessen, these challenges will require sophisticated and effective leadership to create opportunities for growth and development. We believe that developing leadership capacity within your university is the most effective way to ensure that you will have the leadership you need for the future. And we believe that the time to start to do this is now.

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