TRANSCRIPT

Title: Academic Leadership in Higher Education  
Author: Peter Drake  
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Thank you and thank you Rosemary for doing me the honor of inviting a non-Chiropractor to address this audience.

I am going to speak about academic leadership in higher education, which has many levels and many facets.

Before I do, I want to mention two names very briefly and pay my respects to two former VCs of this beautiful university, persons very well known to me. One is the late Edwin Webb who I think more than anyone else got Chiropractic into legal and community recognition in Australia and New Zealand. The other is Di Yerbury, my very good friend, who was VC for 17 years and is the person basically responsible for turning concrete brutality into the beautiful campus you now have.

There is no model of academic leadership, but there are tried, tested and true principles which I draw on now; and I draw not from the literature of education leadership but from my own experience over 40 years in a variety of educational leadership roles. I will concentrate on departmental leadership because the department is the level at which Chiropractic lies in Australian universities.

There is nothing special about academic leadership in Chiropractic. It is just like any other discipline. In all cases the HoD has the job of leading a team progressively and harmoniously towards agreed goals.

It all began for me when I went to the University of New England as a “boy professor”, charged with leading a department of 23 staff including about 10 old lags and 350 equivalent full-time students. I made every mistake in the book, mostly through excessive enthusiasm. I confess that widely and freely but I learned from those mistakes. I never repeated them.

40 years ago the HoD had total authority within the department: total, and no institutional responsibility outside it. Times have changed. Now-a-days the HoD has considerable institutional responsibility and accountability but with greatly diminished authority - so the role is tough.

It is really very challenging. How do you do it? Well presuming you’ve been lucky enough to get the money to make appointments of staff, the selection of those staff must be done very carefully and in accordance with the university processes. And then when they come on board new appointees must each be given clear and agreed designation of their teaching and other duties and of their research expectations, because research is expected of each and every one. They must be then left alone to get on with it. The best boss I ever had was the late Professor Wilfred Prest of the University of Melbourne, trusted me to get on with it. He took very great care with the induction of new staff, but then he left them alone and he never interfered with their work, except if students complained vociferously of a particular teacher. He trusted us to do out work well and that trust paid big dividends.

Now-a-days academic members of staff expect to have a voice in departmental objectives and strategies. A voice yes, but not a determining responsibility. It is the Head of Dept. who carries the can and who must
make final decisions and bear the responsibility for the whole department. Now the Head must exercise this responsibility without being authoritarian which would provoke resistance and non-cooperation, and we don’t want that. So the Head must consult staff fully and ensure that final decisions are transparent to all staff.

The key to success is respect for each member of staff. If you give respect, I tell you, you get it back. Of course disagreements will arise, but those disagreements must be managed by listening and with courtesy on both sides of the disagreement and this will lead to staff respecting the Head and the department playing as a team.

It is important that a Head of Department has a real desire to promote the career development of each and every staff member. Very important. Otherwise the person should not be Head. This means being familiar with their experience, their interests and their abilities. It means encouraging them and where necessary coaching them.

The Head should be aware of the quality of each one’s classroom and online delivery without breathing down the back of their necks. The Head must especially encourage each one’s scholarship and research, including support for research funding as deserved; and if requested, reading drafts of their research papers, and giving them some feedback. Team research should also be encouraged, especially as a way to build confidence of junior staff members. But individual brilliance should never be stifled or drowned under a team framework. If you have somebody really good, get them ahead.

All disciplines face greater or lesser adjustments to curriculum as subjects develop over time. This is inevitable. Standing still is a policy for failure. However change is very hard and must be managed with understanding, tact and care. The aim is to achieve a high degree of collegial ownership of the department’s curriculum and strategy.

Similarly, staff membership is not static, some will always be leaving. Often one of the better performers. This must not be resisted. Each person should be supported in his or her career betterment, even if it means moving on elsewhere.

Regular staff meetings are important and so too is the recording of decisions made and actions allocated. But these things should not be overdone, lest they lead to process overwhelming substance. I’ll reach into my history and tell you a slightly amusing little story in that regard. When I was Chairman of Academic Board at the University of New England, that role gave one a seat on university council for the period of the appointment. The council was unwieldy – 19 persons: far too large and of course it was heavily politicized. On one occasion the council convened at 10 am in the morning, and went to lunch at 12.30pm and they had not yet agreed to adopt the minutes of the previous meeting! And that simply is the absolute truth. My point is that minutes should be simply a record of decisions taken with occasional minuting of the reasons to arriving at the decision. (There will probably be people in this room, who disagree with this violently). Minutes of academic meetings are not Hansard. You do not want some individual coming in, as happened on that occasion at New England, where we had the Chancellor (a wonderful, dear man who was a rural scientist) who could not control the meeting. It was hopeless and so there was so-and-so who said “Chancellor I distinctly remember that I said xyz and it is recorded here as abc. I move that the minutes be corrected.” You cannot have that kind of stuff. It is not Hansard, it is a record of what you agreed to do.

If you are the Head of Department, you must lead from the front and propose directions. And you should have the confidence to do it. Confidence is very important in a job like that.
Now I stress this one. A very important goal of Chiropractic leadership in universities is to ensure that the discipline does not become an orphan or a silo. Very important. It should be rather, a respected component of the broader sciences group. By participating fully in this way at eye level with cognate subjects, Chiro both gets and gives a great deal of cross disciplinary cooperation and development to everyone’s benefit.

When you are Head you must consult fully and get the staff on board for the journey. The team should move forward together and sing the same song. And if you are the Head - get this - be sure to teach and teach a fair load. Your colleagues will respect you if you do, but they will despise you if you do not.

Finally, it is a pretty good idea to socialize and entertain modestly with your colleagues. But never get too close to any one colleague. Distance lends authority, familiarity erodes it.

So there’s a few thoughts from my experience. And that’s it.

Thank you.