

Piloting the academic leadership plane

Co-operation between academic leaders and professional managers is essential for the success of large business schools says **Eric Ponsoonet**



Professional organisations such as law firms, consultancies, hospitals, schools and universities are usually led by a combination of experts (lawyers, consultants, doctors, professors) and professional managers who have to co-operate with each other on a daily basis to ensure the work of the organisation gets done.

In some cases the “corporatisation” of, for example, law firms through the recruitment of management professionals (CFOs, COOs) has generated new workplace challenges for both newcomers and managing partners.

Does a similar situation exist in academic institutions, in particular in large business schools, where professors, who are strongly focused on their academic agenda, and a fast-growing body of non-academic professional managers have to co-operate in running the institution?

The specificity of academic culture, the role of faculty in management and the faculty-administrator relationship have all been identified as sources of challenges and tensions in the professionalisation of institutional work in universities and business schools. The growing role of the administrators and the intrusive behaviour of some other stakeholders are often perceived by professional academics as a threat to an institution’s academic culture and academic leadership.

At the same time, top universities and business schools perform well and have retained their position for very lengthy periods, sometimes over centuries. This suggests that their leadership and management structure has a proven capacity to adapt in the long term.

Interviews with 15 very senior non-academic directors and academic deans in business schools and universities in the US (10), Europe (4) and Asia (1) allowed two ethnographical questions to be answered:

- What kind of *organisational structure* ensures efficient, adaptive and shared leadership in large business schools?
- How does this structure work in terms of *human interaction*, specifically between professors and professional managers?

The interviews revealed similarities in terms of organisational structures.

Business schools are managed by a combination of academic and non-academic employees, the latter increasing more rapidly in numbers than the former. Based on 12 large business schools (employing more than 300 non-academic employees), administrative staffing increased more rapidly for all (+21% on average) than faculty size (+4%) between 2009 and 2014.

As for many large businesses, the organisation chart of large business schools is vertical (Figure 1)

But the faculty is often not represented in organisation charts and the academic and non-academic communities are separate on many dimensions (for example, recruitment, evaluation and management). In some US schools, professors who assume an administrative position (such as departmental deanships) do not assume formal responsibility for managing any administrative staff.

Generally, faculty organisation is rather flat. The main goal is to ensure equal treatment and a high degree of association or consultation of faculty, especially concerning academic topics.

The duality of communities in large academic business schools is represented in Figure 2 (overleaf), which shows what I have termed the “academic leadership plane”.

In this image, the wings, representing the faculty, are the key device that enables the plane to fly. The body of the plane is the administration’s rather vertical organisation. The intersection at the top (the cockpit) is occupied by the dean and the executive team, in which a small group of professors and non-academic managers have to co-operate in order to keep the plane flying.

In smaller business schools in which the divide between academic and non-academic staff is less obvious, the leadership structure is simpler with shared responsibilities between a small number of professors and staff, who generally all know each other. A divided structure becomes obvious when academic institutions grow and reach a certain size. Structures enable schools to manage professors equally and to organise administrative staff and processes efficiently. In parallel, the contact between the two groups becomes more limited on board the plane.



Figure 1:
The organisation chart of a typical large business school

What is the leadership mode in such a unique model?

Professors always have the leading responsibility for any major strategy or decision, either as a body (the faculty) or in administrative leadership roles. According to the interviewees, the captain of the plane as well as the majority of occupants in the cockpit should be professors. Schools have sometimes developed specific tactics to keep such academic control.

That said, the literature and interviews confirm that many professors are not – or do not express the willingness to be – really engaged in the leadership of their school.

This can come from a fear of becoming disconnected from the academic community, which is linked to the specificity of academic careers and the permanent investment they require, especially in research. The need to make trade-offs in an administrative position can also generate tensions with other professors. Finally, the possibility of failure in a management role is also seen as a potential risk for credibility, including academic credibility in the case of business schools.

As commonly mentioned by academics themselves, they have not been educated to become teams or business line managers. They sometimes develop an approach with students, which may be inadequate to lead a management team. Moreover, large academic institutions have become more complex and require professional management. This requires school leaders to understand and be responsible for a large scope of functions and to delegate – unlike an academic career, which pushes a researcher to specialise in a narrow area and promotes individual work.

Finally, a key challenge comes from the outside world, especially in business schools because of their proximity to corporations and alumni. Deans need to spend a large part of their time with external stakeholders and this relationship can be challenging.

Figure 4 shows the different external stakeholders for a professor and for an administrator, and how they can act like two opposing winds blowing on the academic leadership plane.

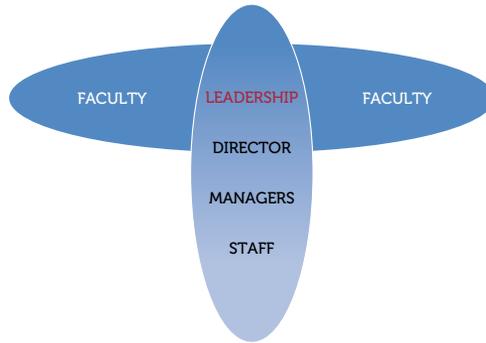


Figure 2:
The academic leadership plane

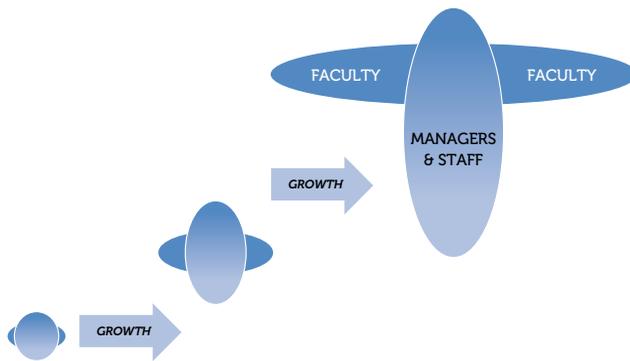


Figure 3:
The evolution of the academic leadership plane

A solid intersection between professors (the wings) and professionals (the body) is essential to manage the external world

Shared management by faculty and non-academic staff is usually applied in the wings, especially for academic topics. Nevertheless, many topics have both academic and economic elements. And interviews confirmed a division of knowledge between the two communities, with a large majority of professors not being involved in management and having little knowledge about how their institution is run. However, in parallel, a large majority of the staff have limited contact with professors, their courses or their academic production.

The design of joint teams is common and essential for many processes. The little planes that make up the academic leadership squadron represent committees, task forces or processes where a small number of professors and managers work together on a specific topic (see Figure 5).



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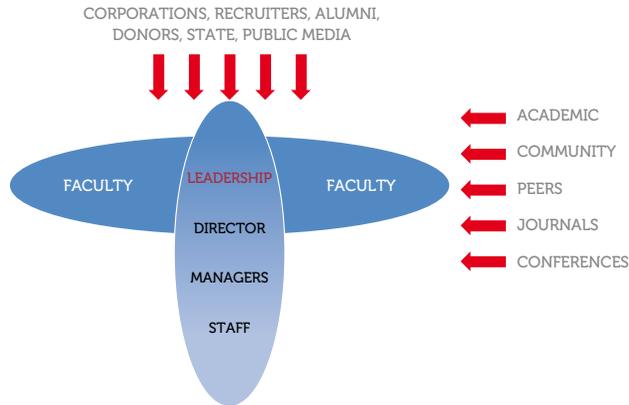


Figure 4: Conflicting wind directions can create turbulence for the academic leadership plane

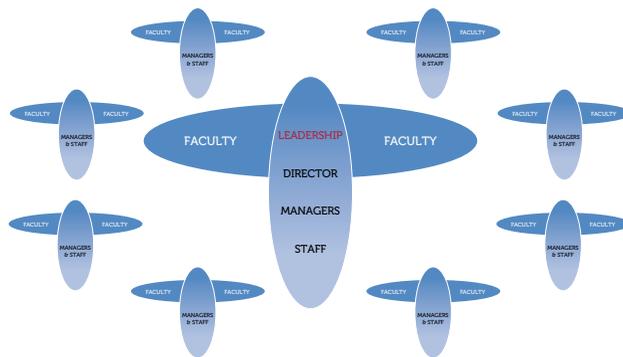


Figure 5: The academic leadership squadron

of emotions in these relationships. The cultural preference for compromise and consensus in academic institutions and business schools rather than authoritarian decision making makes the understanding and management of possible obstacles even more essential.

A better awareness of the five core concerns for each community can help to mitigate obstacles such as excessive self-centred perspectives (academic v economic), automatic ways of thinking and behaving (conservatism), and strong negative emotions or insufficient social skills (conflicts).

Interviews confirmed that, through learning and experimentation, senior administrators and academic deans can learn how to play a crucial role as intermediaries between the academic world, economic realities and external stakeholders. It requires newly appointed academic deans to change some of their past perceptions as professors uninvolved in management and learn how to manage a team, which differs from managing students. It also requires newly recruited professional managers to understand and adapt to the academic culture, especially in terms of decision-making processes and communication, which differs from the corporate environment.

In both cases, this adaptation process can be tough and frustrating. Nevertheless, the presence of such seasoned academic and professional administrators in large academic institutions will remain a key condition for cohesion and long-term success.

Under the captaincy of the dean, they have the capacity to behave as a solid cockpit team in order to preserve the integrity of the academic leadership plane and keep it on course in any future turbulence in the same way that the oldest academic institutions and universities have been able to survive, adapt and flourish over many centuries.

Human complexity aboard the academic leadership plane

Academic and non-academic colleagues have to co-operate and work efficiently with each other in all of these planes. Academic literature and interviews confirmed that academic and non-academic colleagues differ on the five dimensions or core concerns: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status and role. These differences come mainly from the specificity of the academic career compared to professional careers.

These differences can generate negative emotions, cause difficulties in establishing good dialogue and building constructive solutions. They have to be actively managed to enable the formation of the multiple academic leadership planes flying within an institution.

Only a high degree of awareness of these differences in core concerns and of their origin can help improve negotiations, relationships in general and an understanding of the importance



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Eric Ponsoynet is the Director General Administration at INSEAD, France. This article is based on a masters thesis by the author as part of his EMCCC (Coaching and Consulting for Change) program at INSEAD. For more details and references see https://flora.insead.edu/fichiersti_wp/InseadEMCCctheseswave15/82390.pdf