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Sharing Leadership within Colleges and Universities

This essay takes concepts from the previous article by Darrell Jodock and applies them to the college or university setting. I address the unique aspects of higher education to help understand how to create an environment for vocational leadership, starting at the institutional level, and then drilling down to individual roles.

Jodock referred in his article to what Ronald Heifetz calls “moving to the balcony”—stepping back to view the whole. Practicing vocational leadership in colleges and universities requires that we move to the balcony and focus on the mission and purpose of our institutions.¹

Mission and Purpose of Lutheran Colleges and Universities

Mission statements are meant to guide institutions; what is more, vocational leadership should be tied to the mission. The mission statement of ELCA colleges and universities are readily available online. Read through some of these statements—including that of your own college or university—and think about the following questions:

1. How do these mission statements articulate the institutions’ Lutheran identity and the concept of vocation?
2. The vocation of a Lutheran college or university responds to the needs of its specific community. How do these mission statements articulate service to the neighbor and the community?

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3. How does your institution live out its mission?
4. In your own work, how do you connect to, or support, your institution’s mission statement?

Of course, mission statements are not unique to higher education. All types of organizations have mission statements. To be effective leaders and to encourage vocational leadership within higher education we have to look beyond the mission statement and understand some of the unique aspects of the work environment in higher education.

If you have worked both in higher education and also in an organization outside of higher education, then you are well aware of significant differences between higher education and corporations. Some differences include:

- Differing work environments and expectations of faculty and staff;
- Faculty governance systems;
- The use of committees and consensus-seeking, which slow decision-making processes;
- Close contact—and sometimes uneasy relationships—between faculty and staff.



The issue of faculty and staff relationships warrants further discussion. In his article, Jodock writes that “vocational leadership values a person’s colleagues enough not to manipulate. It works best when it can draw on relationships of trust.” To practice vocational leadership we have to find ways to create safe and trusting environments, which includes the relationships between faculty and staff.

Between Faculty and Staff

There is a tendency among some faculty to be unaware of the way they treat staff. There are situations at my institution where faculty and staff have been placed into a working relationship on a particular project, and the staff members have felt that faculty were disrespectful. Staff members have reported feeling disregarded and ignored, and felt that they were treated as if they are less important than faculty. Sometimes this comes from reactions to faculty being overly critical.

Faculty members are very good at probing, questioning and analyzing. It is natural for some faculty members, when ideas are presented, to immediately criticize and find fault. They question and resist accepting anything at face value. In situations where staff and faculty are placed in the same room to solve an issue or have a discussion, faculty members make good use of their critical minds. That can lead to staff perceiving faculty to be abrasive, rude, and critical. And of course, they are critical because that is what they are trained to be. This cultural difference needs to be understood for faculty and staff to learn to work together. When a faculty member becomes critical of an idea, it is important not to take it personally. Sometimes the feeling of disrespect that staff members report is because of this difference in how staff and faculty approach an issue. Other times it may be due to a true lack of respect that faculty unfortunately can have toward staff, based on differences in power and education.

If you are a faculty member and you don’t think this happens at your institution, then you are challenged to be more mindful, and to make an effort to more closely observe interactions. You might ask some of the staff leaders on your campus about their experiences and observations.

Another issue related to faculty and staff relationships shows a lack of respect in the other direction. It is not uncommon to hear staff members make derogatory comments about faculty related to their schedules. Looking at faculty schedules listed on their office doors might give a wrong impression because the schedules tend to only indicate class times and office hours. What is not listed is the time spent prepping for classes, keeping up with their discipline, grading papers, and serving in various roles on campus. Staying up until midnight grading papers doesn’t show up on the schedule posted on the door. Faculty members do have more flexible work hours, and that can be enviable to staff who have to report in at 8:00 AM every day, twelve months of the year.

To create an environment for vocational leadership, these disrespectful comments and actions between faculty and staff must be addressed and changed. Consider the following questions:

1. Are there examples of times when you have observed staff or faculty at your institution being disrespectful of each other?
2. How might we create an environment of trust and respect among faculty and staff, or other groups on campus?

Leaders, Followers, and Team Players

Incorporating vocational leadership into our work means that we need to focus on individual roles and recognize the importance of support systems. We all play a variety of roles in our work. Sometimes we’re in a leadership capacity, whether it is a formal leadership role of supervising others or teaching a class. Sometimes it is less formal—it might be leading an activity or project. All of us are also followers. We all have someone to whom we report, and we also take on a follower role in various activities. In any given day, it is possible to go back and forth between leading, following, and being a team player.

If vocational leadership creates an atmosphere that is mutually empowering, then we need to consider how to both support and empower those who lead, and also how to take feedback from those who follow.

Consider the following questions:

1. How can you support those who lead? How can you empower those in leadership roles?
2. How can those who follow support you? What can you do to encourage their support?
3. What will get in the way of this happening?

Imagine what it would be like if everyone at your institution tried to create this environment of mutual support!

Vocational leadership starts with using your mission statement, guiding your institution to “move toward the balcony,” and creating a common understanding of serving the neighbor and the community. It requires that we understand the unique aspects of higher education including relationships between faculty and staff. Finally, it means looking for ways to support those who lead and to encourage feedback from others.

Endnotes

1. Special thanks to Darrell Jodock for preparing the outline that the author used for this presentation at the 2014 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference.

CALLING ALL CHANGEMAKERS...



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