BRIDGE-BUILDING LEADERSHIP:

A MODEL FOR 21ST CENTURY HE LEADERSHIP

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THE NEED FOR A NEW MODEL OF LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The external challenges that universities in the UK, Europe, North America and Australia are facing particularly in the light of the rise of East Asian universities is putting a premium on the effective leadership of nation state higher education systems and of their individual institutions.

> *Politically, economically, and environmentally, we are living in a world where leadership decisions anywhere now affect everything and everyone everywhere. Autonomous decisions have become a thing of the past* (Lipman-Bluman, 2000: 4)

Reductions in the public funding of teaching, more focused and concentrated research funding, the increasing pressure generated by global league tables, the need to be attractive to the lucrative international student market and levels of rising student debt are all factors that higher education institutions will have to fully understand and respond to.

This challenging external environment contains both threat and opportunity. Those universities that are clear about their shared purpose and focus their resources on the key priorities associated with it ought to be well placed to build distinctiveness. On the other hand those that do not have a shared purpose, and substitute this for a metric driven pursuit of league table position or who simply try to do much with too little may well become part of a new squeezed middle of undifferentiated institutions.

The galvanising effect of shared purpose should not be underestimated. In the context of universities as enlightenment institutions this may concern those who see high levels of individual autonomy as key to their identity as academics and more instrumentally to the quality and character of their research. Shared purpose however, should not be confused with an excessively managerial approach to running a university. Shared purpose is about defining 'the cause worth fighting for' that helps to define the key values, goals and priorities worth pursuing. It helps to focus effort and resources in a meaningful way. Importantly it also helps to define the organisational connections (bridges) that need to be improved in order that these values, goals and priorities can be realised.

Herein lies a stark choice that universities are faced with. Do they equip themselves to respond to an increasingly complex higher education world by reinforcing the fragmentation associated with the divided university or do they set about joining things up to create the conditions for a connected university to flourish. This is a leadership choice.

Our practical experience in global higher education and our knowledge of the leadership literature has led us to conclude that a new model of leadership in higher education that connects up the university is a leadership model fit for the challenges of 21st century universities. *Bridge-Building Leadership* is for those who choose the connected university.

THE INTELLECTUAL BASIS OF BRIDGE-BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Thought around *Bridge-Building Leadership* has emerged from experiences of working with a number of organisations from the private, public and third sectors in addition to our work in global higher education. This thought has been shaped by a body of literature broadly focused on organisational effectiveness, leadership, complexity and collaboration.

> *If organisations are seen as complex evolving systems, co-evolving within a social 'ecosystem', then our thinking about strategy and management changes. With the changed perspective comes a different way of acting and relating and this inevitably results in different ways of working. In turn, the new types of relationship and approaches to work will provide the* conditions *for the emergence of new organisational forms* (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003: 23)

The notion of *Bridge-Building Leadership* as a model draws on complexity theory influenced strongly by the work of Ralph Stacey (2010) and Eve Mitleton-Kelly (2003). Stacey (2010) suggested that organisations, and the people working within them, should be conceptualised as living, complex adaptive systems. This, fundamentally, because complex living systems have a goal (to live, for example) and a set of rules of behaviour to achieve that purpose. Mitleton-Kelly (2003: 25) presented a working definition of organisational complexity as 'the intricate inter-relationships of individuals…and the effects of inter-actions within the organisation, as well as between institutions within a social ecosystem' and goes on to suggest theories of complexity provide 'a way of thinking and a way of seeing the world'. This 'way of seeing the world' or a 'complexity lens' views organisations as open systems connected up by human networks and relationships that are capable of learning from and adapting to the environment in which they exist. Taking a complexity perspective can help present a case as to why top down control and micro-management might not be the only answer and that an emergent and less rigidly planned approach might allow a more organic and effective response to the external challenges and opportunities faced by higher education institutions across the globe.

In this regard, *Bridge-Building Leadership* is framed around the notion of 'adaptive challenges'; challenges which require changes in 'people's priorities, beliefs, habits and loyalties' in which making progress requires 'mobilising discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew' (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009: 19). The *Bridge-Building Leadership* model does not therefore simply conceptualise these challenges as 'technical problems' which can be 'fixed' through authoritative expertise and old ways of working (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009: 19).

Bridge-Building Leadership is further informed by the work of Byram (1997) and Brislin et al. (1986) focused on 'cross-cultural competence'. Cross-cultural competence is important in helping to understand what it takes to work across and beyond traditional (cultural) boundaries. It focuses us on the need to unlearn before we can learn about a new culture, it privileges respectful curiosity, empathy, behavioural flexibility and sensitivity to others. It also suggests that a tolerance of ambiguity is central to effectiveness (Bryam, 1997; Brislin et al., 1986). In this regard cross-cultural competence can be directly applied to a view of leadership that sees its central role as working across and beyond the silos and boundaries that frequently define (and sometimes defeat) the university.

Bridge-Building Leadership is strongly underpinned by a post-heroic perspective on leadership, consciously steering away from traditional leadership ideals of 'individualism, control, assertiveness, and skills of advocacy and domination' (Fletcher, 2004: 650). Post-heroic leadership ideals, as put forward by Eicher (2006), encompassing empowerment, risk taking, innovation, participation and development are central to the notion of 'bridge-building'.

Framed by this post-heroic view, *Bridge-Building Leadership* is influenced by work on distributed leadership (Drath, 2001; Raelin, 2003), connective leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2000) and systemic leadership (Oshry, 2007; Wheatley, 1999) which all critique the 'the individual leader as hero'. All these leadership theories broadly describe organisations as living human systems made up of a series of human relationships that can create a purposeful, values centric community. Herein, the broad conception of distributed leadership, one shared by the notion of 'bridge-building', is the dispersal of power, enabled by a focus upon developing leadership throughout an organisation; leadership which is connected to a compelling purpose and not a singular focus upon developing a small number of heroic leaders (Drath, 2001: Raelin, 2003). This turns on its head the conventional wisdom of developing a relatively small number of middle and senior managers as individual leaders whilst assuming that everyone else will need to follow. *Bridge-Building Leadership* seeks to develop a systemic leadership capability.

Literature on collaboration and the concept of collaborative leadership, notably by Linden (2010) and Hansen (2009), has also shaped the development of the *Bridge-Building Leadership* model. In particular Hansen (2009: 15), who suggests that 'in all cases, collaboration needs to involve people' is central to the notion of how *Bridge-Building Leadership* is enacted and embedded in universities. On the surface there appears nothing profound in the view that meaningful collaboration requires the involvement of people. However, as Hansen (2009: 15) posits, collaboration 'for its own sake' or pseudo collaboration in which 'all that is going on is shipping data back and forth between units' is not collaboration at all. Building on this view of 'people' being central to collaboration, Linden (2010) locates the existence of a common mutual interest and a focus upon delivering worthwhile and widely legitimised outcomes as being central to effective and genuine collaboration. In particular, Linden identifies trust in addition to an open, credible process as a critical element of collaboration, as without it the partners are unlikely to take the necessary personal risks to engage and explore.

Fundamentally *Bridge-Building Leadership* is a values centric leadership model. It assumes that every employee has a right to expect a balanced relationship with their employer based upon the tripartite relationship between efficiency (performance), equity and voice, often termed 'good work' (Budd, 2004 ; Coats, 2005; Overell, 2013). It means that employees are treated as partners and are allowed to participate (and lead) more meaningfully in the employment relationship. The psychological benefits of having a reasonable degree of influence (control) over what happens to us at work is well researched and evidenced by amongst others Marmot et al. (1991). This values based approach puts employee participation and well-being at its heart.

FROM A DIVIDED UNIVERSITY TO A CONNECTED UNIVERSITY

A risk in responding to external threat or opportunity is that institutions become fragmented, disconnected and trapped in a series of self-limiting silos. This then works directly against inter-disciplinary and multi-university research collaboration on the great problems of our time. It privileges tribal behaviour over behaviours consistent with building a 'world-class university'. It accentuates the divides between academics and administrators and constrains coherent local and global partnerships. It makes it very difficult for those in cross-cutting roles to make progress. It pits units against each other in a fight for resources whilst the overarching purpose of the university as a whole is lost in the cacophony of tactical, sometimes disciplinary based turf battles. Furthermore it can encourage university executive teams to exert a stronger central control to mitigate the effects of an increasingly divided and siloed organisation. The perverse result of this latter strategy is frequently to reduce autonomy and local empowerment and with it discretionary effort, innovation and entrepreneurship. This then serves to reinforce the silos that the intervention was initially seeking to address and in doing so can inadvertently contribute to an increasingly divided university.

In short, the divided university is not conceptualised as a living system but a series of largely independent and disaggregated parts. This is not a formula likely to produce the basis for success in an era where universities will increasingly have to join themselves up to make a visibly positive difference on and for the world. Universities are living systems that need to adapt, in an agile way, to the context that they find themselves in. In a living system all the parts are interconnected so that action in one part will have consequences for another.

The key element required to effect the shift from a divided to a connected university is leadership. Leadership that goes beyond the fashion for reifying heroic individual leaders as saviours (e.g. the charismatic and/or authoritarian Vice-Chancellor) and identifies the need for collective leadership as a property of the system. In short, to succeed in an increasingly complex world leadership at all levels of an organisation needs to emerge and effectively engage with the challenges and opportunities that the external environment presents.

It is in this context that Elementa Leadership has developed a *Bridge-Building Leadership* programme that has been successfully tailored to meet the needs of a number of leading universities.

CONCLUSION

It is our view and experience that developing leaders as 'bridge-builders' throughout a university shifts the culture towards purposeful connectedness and collaboration and produces better outcomes for the university as a whole and its stakeholders. In a time of increasing global pluralism, diversity and individual autonomy it is 'bridge-building' leaders that are able to produce the conditions in which both independence and interdependence can successfully co-exist and flourish.

Universities will increasingly need 'bridge-builders' who, for example, are able to fuse the best of the academic with the best of the administrative, who can forge productive local and global partnerships, broker world class interdisciplinary research collaboration, successfully steer and integrate cross-cutting agendas and co-create valued solutions with students and staff. 'Bridge-builders' help to join the whole system up.

Bridge-Building Leadership is a 21st century leadership model for higher education. It offers universities a guiding conceptual framework which can inform and shape their investment in leadership development. It can help to shift the focus and culture towards purposeful connections and collaboration and away from the wasted energy of the 'divided university' and any unhealthy addiction to heroic leaders. It takes common purpose, dialogue, trust and shared commitment as central to building the necessary bridges that will enable purposeful collaboration underpinned by a strong set of values that privilege voice, equity, excellence and community.

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ABOUT ELEMENTA LEADERSHIP

Elementa Leadership is a specialist leadership and organisation development consultancy with cross-sectoral international experience, focused on UK higher education. We are currently working at strategic level with universities that cover the all HE mission groups. We are committed to the future of UK higher education as central to the development of both a better society and a better economy.

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Richard is managing director of Elementa Leadership. He has particular experience in working with top teams around strategy, change and culture. Richard has undertaken leadership and organisation development assignments throughout the UK and Europe, working across sectors and predominantly at executive level. He been centrally involved in leadership development programmes that have won the Times Higher Education 'Outstanding Contribution to Leadership Development' award in both 2009 and 2014. Richard has led a number of study visits to overseas universities involving UK HE leaders. The learning from these visits has helped to further develop thinking around the concepts of *Bridge-Building Leadership* and *the Agile University*. Richard has an MSc Organisational Behaviour (Distinction) from Birkbeck College, University of London.

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