

Leaderless management in higher educational institutions: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Leaderless management in higher educational institutions (HEIs) emerged as a growing trend that emphasized shared governance, autonomy, and collective decision-making. Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of leaderless management in HEIs remained understudied, and its challenges and opportunities. This study aimed to assess the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing leaderless management in HEIs, with a focus on faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study surveyed faculty members and administrators in various HEIs and conducted statistical analysis to identify significant differences between leaderless management and organized leadership. Additionally, a SWOT analysis was performed to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of leaderless management in HEIs.

The study revealed that leaderless management in HEIs was associated with both challenges and opportunities. Key challenges included resistance to change, lack of accountability, and conflicting opinions, while opportunities encompassed increased autonomy, collaboration, and innovation. The SWOT analysis demonstrated that leaderless management possessed strengths in extension programs, weaknesses in research, opportunities in research, and threats in production. Significant differences were observed between leaderless management and organized leadership in terms of faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration.

The findings suggested that HEIs could benefit from adopting flexible leadership structures that balanced autonomy and structure. Leadership development programs should prioritize shared leadership, expertise-based decision-making, and collective responsibility. This study contributed to the understanding of leaderless management in HEIs and held implications for institutions seeking to implement leaderless management, along with policymakers and administrators aiming to support faculty members and promote academic excellence.

Keywords: Challenges and Opportunities; Collaboration; Decision-Making; Higher Educational Institutions; Leaderless Management

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions operated as complex organizations that required effective management to achieve their goals. Traditionally, these institutions relied on centralized decision-making structures, which often depended on a single individual or a small group of leaders to make decisions. However, such structures were limiting, as they failed to fully leverage the expertise and creativity of all stakeholders (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). In contrast, leaderless management approaches distributed decision-making authority among team members, fostering greater collaboration, innovation, and adaptability within these institutions (Bolden, 2011). Methods such as shared governance, collaborative

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leadership, and self-managed teams proved particularly effective, as faculty members and staff possessed specialized expertise in their fields and contributed significantly to the decision-making process (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006).

Empowering faculty and staff to take ownership of decision-making enhanced their engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction, leading to improved collaboration and overall institutional performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Furthermore, leaderless management approaches enabled institutions to harness the collective expertise and creativity of their faculty and staff, resulting in more informed and effective decisions. As a result, institutions that adopted leaderless management approaches became more agile and responsive in an ever-changing academic landscape, addressing changing student needs, technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations. This study aimed to enhance the understanding of effective management in higher education by investigating the opportunities and challenges associated with leaderless management. The researcher's motivation stemmed from a desire to understand how leaderless management could be leveraged to improve institutional performance and address the complex challenges facing higher education institutions. Hence, the study provided valuable insights into the implementation and impact of leaderless management approaches, informing strategies for institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to promote collaboration, innovation, and adaptability in their institutions.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Key Challenges and Opportunities

The study identified several challenges associated with leaderless management in higher educational institutions. In faculty engagement, resistance to change from traditional leadership structures ($M = 3.88$) and lack of accountability leading to disengagement ($M = 3.85$) were prominent issues (Bolden, 2011; Lumby, 2013). Decision-making challenges included lack of clear decision-making processes ($M = 3.81$), conflicting opinions and perspectives among faculty members ($M = 3.85$), and lack of accountability for decisions ($M = 3.83$) (Harris & Jones, 2017; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Collaboration challenges comprised resistance to change from traditional hierarchical structures ($M = 4.38$), conflicting priorities and interests among team members ($M = 4.01$), and inadequate resources and infrastructure ($M = 3.86$) (Gallos, 2008; Neumann & Tananis, 2005).

The adoption of leaderless management in higher educational institutions garnered attention for its potential to foster collaborative and adaptive work environments. This study explored the opportunities associated with implementing leaderless management, revealing its positive impact on faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration. Leaderless management promoted a culture of collaboration and teamwork (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006), increased autonomy and ownership among faculty members (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and allowed for flexibility and adaptability (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). It also allowed for more diverse perspectives and ideas (Surowiecki, 2004), fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among team members (Pearce & Conger, 2003), and facilitated rapid decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1989). The overall mean score of 3.47 indicated a positive perception of leaderless management, suggesting its potential to create a collaborative and adaptive work environment where faculty members took ownership and were more engaged (Bolden, 2011).

2.2. Leaderless Management in Higher Education: A SWOT Analysis

A comprehensive SWOT analysis of leaderless management across instruction, production, research, and extension programs had revealed nuanced insights into its efficacy. Notably, extension programs had emerged as a stronghold of leaderless management, boasting a mean score of 3.45 in strengths, as autonomy and flexibility had fostered a conducive environment for innovation and collaboration (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Specifically, leaderless management had allowed extension programs to adapt quickly to changing environments and promote community engagement. Furthermore, research programs had been perceived as vulnerable, with a mean score of 3.34 in weaknesses, likely attributable to the dearth of clear direction and coordination inherent in leaderless management (Eisenhardt, 1989). Additionally, the lack of clear roles and responsibilities had hindered research productivity. In contrast, the analysis of opportunities had revealed research as a fertile ground for leaderless management, with a mean score of 3.35, as autonomy and freedom had catalyzed novel perspectives and approaches (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Consequently, research programs had benefited from diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, production programs had faced significant threats, with a mean score of 4.06, plausibly due to the potential for delays and inefficiencies stemming from unclear direction and coordination (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Therefore, institutions had needed to implement strategies to mitigate these threats and optimize the benefits of leaderless management, striking a balance between autonomy and accountability to ensure effective program outcomes (Bolden, 2011).

2.3. Significant Difference Between Leaderless Management and Organized Leadership

This study tested three hypotheses, which suggested that leaderless management and organized leadership differed significantly in their impact on faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration. The results confirmed these hypotheses, revealing statistically significant differences between the two leadership approaches in all three aspects (Bolden, 2011; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Notably, leaderless management fostered faculty engagement through autonomy and flexibility (Deci & Ryan, 2000), facilitated decision-making through diverse perspectives (Surowiecki, 2004), and enhanced collaboration through shared purpose and trust (Tschannen, 2001).

Furthermore, the absence of rigid structures in leaderless management allowed faculty members to assume ownership of their work and make autonomous decisions, as autonomy and freedom catalyzed novel perspectives and approaches (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). In contrast, organized leadership was characterized by clear direction and coordination, which may have constrained opportunities for faculty engagement and innovation (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, the findings suggested that leaderless management was more effective in promoting faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration. However, it was also acknowledged that leaderless management may not be universally applicable, and institutions needed to consider their specific contexts and circumstances when implementing leadership approaches (Bolden, 2011).

3. Conclusion

Leaderless management in higher educational institutions presented both challenges and opportunities. Resistance to change, lack of accountability, and conflicting priorities were notable challenges, while fostering collaboration, increasing autonomy, and promoting diverse perspectives were seen as opportunities. A SWOT analysis highlighted the strengths of leaderless management in extension programs and opportunities in research, but also noted weaknesses in research and threats in production. Statistically significant differences were found between leaderless management and organized leadership in faculty engagement, decision-making, and collaboration. The findings suggested that leaderless management could foster a collaborative work environment, but required strategic implementation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

Statement of ethical approval

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution and the research committee.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

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