

Short Report: Reflections on leadership in transition

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This short report follows a keynote talk given by Emeritus Professor Scott on 14 July 2017, in Adelaide, at the annual conference of the Association.

The two integrating themes of the plenary presentation were:

- Good ideas with no ideas about how to implement them are wasted ideas
- Change doesn't just happen but must be led, and deftly (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Why focus on effective change leadership in health education?

Considerable effort goes into proposing learning and teaching improvements and transition support in higher education. Less attention is given to ensuring these are put into practice consistently, effectively and sustainably. As observed some 20 years ago, failed change costs financially, educationally, psychology and nationally (Scott, 1999).

Higher education develops change leaders, both professional leaders who will ensure a socially, culturally, economically and environmentally-sustainable future and political leaders. Our work with 160 international universities has repeatedly identified that, in the current rapidly-changing context, universities need to develop graduates who are work ready for today (i.e., “competent” professionals who are highly skilled and knowledgeable) and work ready *plus* for an uncertain tomorrow (i.e., “capable” professionals who are emotionally intelligent, adaptive, creative, diagnostic, reflective and inventive) (Scott, 2016) (see *FLIPCurric.edu.au*). Being work ready *plus* means, inter alia, being sustainability literate, change implementation savvy, inventive, adaptable, resilient and clear on where one stands on tacit assumptions driving the 21st century agenda (e.g., “growth is good for everyone”). Higher education change leaders need these same capabilities and competencies (see *Section 3.3 Getting Started, FLIPCurric.edu.au*).

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Effective change leadership

Our research and experience over the past 45 years has repeatedly found:

- Everyone is a leader of change in their own area of expertise
- Heads of programme are the key arbiters of change in universities—if they don't believe in a requested change, have ideas on how to implement it and see that this will be supported, they will not engage the staff who are to put it into practice in the process of learning how to do it
- Change-capable colleges and universities are built by change-capable leaders who model to their staff how best to act
- Effective change leaders listen, link, leverage then lead, always in that order
- Effective change leaders model (responding to change), teach (help staff learn) and learn from their errors
- Selection and capability development of local and central leaders is poorly managed.

(see *Making It Happen Section/The successful change leader, FLIPCurric.edu.au*).

“Learning leaders in times of change” ALTC study

The *Learning Leaders* study was conducted with 512 Australian university staff identified as effective leaders, ranging from heads of programme to DVCs (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). National and international scrutiny of the findings confirmed their veracity and implications.

The leaders were asked to identify an analogy that best described their day-to-day role. The responses included herding cats, juggling, being the meat in the sandwich, swimming in a tidal pool, working with a dysfunctional family, running a bar, being a tour guide, advancing through bureaucratic mud, trying to nail jelly to the roof whilst putting out spot fires with my feet, living in a medieval castle, being in *Groundhog Day*, being a gardener or conductor, trying to turn around an iron ore carrier and being a 21st-century Sisyphus. Thus, for all of us, ongoing change, unpredictability and having to navigate forces beyond our control is inevitable and intensely tied to human relationships and engagement.

The key challenges for these leaders were:

- Staff—relationships, complaints, engagement and quality
- Having to manage up and down
- Managing change
- Bureaucracy and “value-add”
- Appropriate administrative support
- Student matters
- Balancing time and workload
- Working with reduced resources
- Limited recognition by senior staff

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Higher education leadership capability framework

We developed a comprehensive and validated framework on the most important capabilities for effective change leaders (Figure 1) (Scott et al., 2008). This has been confirmed in subsequent work with international leadership development programmes and studies of early career graduates in a range of professions over the past 20 years.

The framework is comprised of five dimensions and 11 factor-analysed subscales, as outlined in Table 1 (see *Section 3.2 Getting Started, FLIPCurric.edu.au*).

HE Leadership Capability Framework

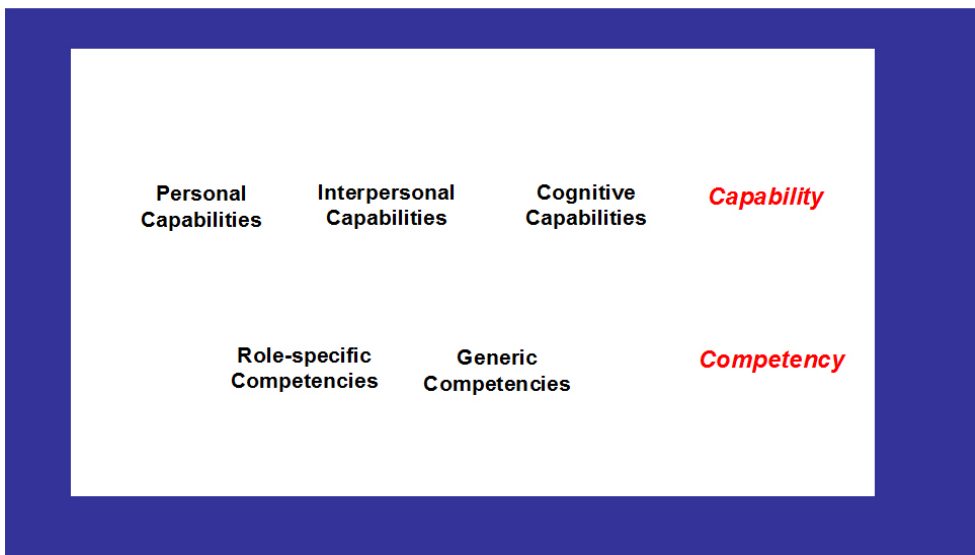


Figure 1. Higher education leadership capability framework.

Top 12 capabilities

Table 2 shows the top 12 capabilities identified by heads of programme and programme coordinators in the *Learning Leaders* study, with capability dimension and comparative rankings identified by heads of school. These highlight how important personal and interpersonal capabilities are and how cognitive capabilities require a contingent and focused approach. Every respondent in our leadership studies has emphasised that capability is most challenged when the unexpected happens.

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Table 1
Capabilities and Competencies in the Framework

Component	Dimension	Subscale
Capability	Personal	Self-regulation Decisiveness Commitment
	Interpersonal	Influencing Empathising
	Cognitive	Diagnosis Strategy Flexibility & responsiveness
Competence	Generic	Transferable skills & knowledge
	Role or discipline specific	Skills & knowledge necessary for effective role practice in the specific discipline or profession

Table 2
Top 12 Capabilities Identified by Heads of Programme and Programme Coordinators

Rank	Top 12 Capabilities	Capability Dimension	Rank by Heads of School
1	Understanding my personal strengths/limitations	Personal	5
2	Able to organise work & manage time	Generic skills & knowledge	9
3	Remaining calm under pressure	Personal	2
4	Energy, passion & enthusiasm for learning and teaching	Personal	20
5	Being transparent & honest in dealings with others	Interpersonal	1
6	Empathising & working productively with staff from a wide range of backgrounds	Interpersonal	3
7	Admitting to and learning from my errors	Personal	7
8	Being true to my personal values and ethics	Personal	6
9	Making sense of and learning from experience	Cognitive	15
10	Thinking creatively and laterally	Cognitive	18
11	Being willing to take a hard decision	Personal	4
12	Maintaining a good work/life balance	Personal	33

Learning leadership

Although capabilities cannot be taught, they can be learnt by using the capabilities outlined in Table 1 to make sense of and learn from experience, especially the unexpected. Table 3 shows the top 10 ways for learning leadership identified by heads of programme and programme coordinators in the *Learning Leaders* study, including rankings identified by heads of school/dean and DVC/PVC where they are significantly different.

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Table 3

Top 10 Ways for Learning Leadership Identified by Heads of Programme and Coordinators

Rank	Top 10 Ways	Significantly different rankings for heads of school/dean	Significantly different rankings for DVC/PVC
1	Learning "on the job" with a framework to make sense of experience		
2	Ad hoc conversations about work with people in similar roles		
3	Informal mentoring and coaching		
4	Participating in peer networks within the university		
5	Completing a relevant tertiary qualification	13	16
6	Study of "real life" workplace problems		
7	Attending learning and teaching conferences	18	18
8	Participating in peer networks beyond the university		
9	Undertaking self-guided reading on leadership		
10	Participating in higher education leadership seminars		

Putting capabilities into practice

The implications for health education leaders are:

- Always listen first (with a case and menu for change), then link (together what most people who are to implement the desired change think is most relevant and feasible), leverage (try out the change with a trial team, under controlled conditions, to identify what works best) and finally lead (scale this up using the pilot team as coaches for others).
- Listen to resisters to identify implementation challenges and engage rather than isolate them.
- Act as a model to the colleagues with whom they work, modelling how to behave constructively when things go awry.
- Recognise leaders are teachers. Because all changes require staff to learn something new, leaders need to apply the same techniques known to engage students, such as "just in time and just for me" help, peer support, proven solutions and constructive feedback.
- Face and learn from your errors.

Change-capable universities, faculties and academic teams

Change-capable universities are built by change-capable leaders modelling how to behave during change. Our studies of successful (adaptable, resilient, morally-robust and productive) higher education institutions show that their cultural profile is the same as the capabilities of the people who lead them:

- Undefensive and responsive
- Evidence-based

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- Outcomes-focused
- Set a small number of widely-supported and demonstrably relevant, desirable, clear and feasible priorities for action
- Take hard decisions
- Make clear who is responsible and accountable
- Acknowledge the important and complementary role played by all staff
- Judiciously use bureaucracy to manage risk
- Effectively use meetings (meeting less but meeting better)
- Transparent and collaborative (listen, link, leverage, then lead)
- Focus on consensus around the data not around the table
- Strategically networked.

Thus, when selecting leaders, it is important to focus on academic excellence and emotional intelligence, “mindfulness” and ability to work contingently and constructively with a wide range of staff (i.e., the capabilities in Table 1).

Effective change implementation

Engaging everyone involved in implementing a desired change is challenging. Strategies found to work are:

- Give greater attention to the “moral purpose” of what we are doing, e.g., ensuring students who are first in family at university get a good degree, effective healthcare for patients and the nation’s well-being. There is a profound difference between “change” (something becoming different) and “progress” (something the individuals concerned judge as better)
- Always listen, link, leverage then lead in that order—steered engagement means building ownership with the people implementing the change
- Start with a case for change and a stocktake, acknowledging what is already happening.

Other key lessons are:

- Change is not an event but a process of learning and unlearning
- How staff like to learn is the same as how students like to learn
- Everyone who has to change (learn) will constantly be asking, “Is this relevant, desirable, clear, feasible?” so consistently address these
- Staff like access to “successful travellers” on the change path, learning guides on making it work, a searchable clearing house of good ideas and learning from others via networked learning (see *Networked Learning and Peer Support*, FLIPCurric.edu.au)
- Culture (“*How we do things around here*”) counts
- A key indicator of change-capable culture is staff saying, “Why don’t we ... ?”, not “Why don’t you ... ?”

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- Learning by doing—use “Ready (agree that change is needed), fire (try out the change under controlled conditions), aim (scale up what works)”, not “ready, aim, aim, aim ...”
- Emphasise consensus around the data through a valid tracking and improvement system for learning and teaching
- Ensure everyone involved knows the indicators to confirm the change is successful for students
- Give everyone room to lead and learn
- Make sure relevant policies, resources, incentives and support are aligned with the change.
- In conclusion, keep in mind that “nothing is new except that which is forgotten” and, as George Bernard Shaw, once said, “Reformers have the misplaced notion that change is achieved by brute sanity”.

References

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Further reading

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