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LEAD PROJECT

Virtues for Academic Leaders

by João Sàágua

jsaagua@unl.pt

Universidade NOVA de Lisboa | www.unl.pt

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1. Skills vs. Virtues

Talking about “skills” has a predominant cognitive character (know that or know how), and I don’t think that captures the essentials of what it takes to be a good academic leader.

So, I will prefer, and use here instead, the term “virtue” (Greek: “ἀρετή”, Aristotle).

A virtue such as ‘honesty’ or ‘generosity’ is not just a tendency to do what is honest or generous; it is a character trait that assigns the person who has it with *complex mindset*.

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1. Skills vs. Virtues

The most significant aspect of this mindset is the wholehearted acceptance of a certain range of considerations as *reasons for action*.

These reasons include beliefs and calculations about consequences of actions – and these two are on the side of knowledge – but they also include values, emotional reactions, interests, expectations and sensibilities. All these combine in preferences and result in (sometimes hard) choices.

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2. Virtues and Practical Wisdom

One thing is to have one or more virtues; the other thing is to act virtuously. Perhaps to have bravery in extreme doesn’t make one’s act virtuous, even if it is brave.

So, to be effective, the relevant virtues that a good academic leader should have are not simply tools in a toolbox (her/his mind, say); they are traits of a character that should materialize within practical wisdom (Greek: “φρόνησις”): prudence, determination, and the sense of good timing (Greek: “καірός”).

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3. What Virtues Should a Leader Have?

Well, most importantly, it all depends on the organization that you are leading: if you are the captain of a rugby team, some virtues are in order; if you are the maestro of a big Symphonic Orchestra, perhaps some other virtues are more relevant, even if we were able to find some commonalities between both jobs.

In short, the virtues an academic leader should have must be adjusted to the kind of organization she/he is leading.

3. What Virtues Should a Leader Have?

It is clear that universities, faculties, academic departments, research centers, and other HEI units, have important differences among themselves; but here I will concentrate on general common features.

For simplicity, I will always be speaking about “Universities”, but you are asked to kindly take this as a shorthand also for all other units just mentioned (faculties, academic departments, ...).

In what follows I will select **5** of these common features; accordingly, I will identify and briefly touch **5** correspondent virtues an academic leader should have; or so I think.

4. Public Service / Spirit of Mission

The MISSION of any University includes (has embedded) a **public service**; or at least a service with a deep social responsibility. (We are not in it only for the money, for win a competition, for the fun, etc.).

This particular public service has as object: the acquisition of education and knowledge by the relevant population (first and foremost national; but also people from other places).

But nowadays this acquisition cannot be an end in itself but it should be articulated with responsible citizenship, labor market and future success (in that order).

Virtue #1: Spirit of Mission

To have the character (Greek: “ἠθος”) of a top rank civil servant for whom fostering the wellbeing of the society that one is serving is always above all other obligations one may have.

In the case of Universities, this implies:

- A permanent struggle to improve quality, and
- A tireless effort to assure that our services reach the ones that deserve it, mostly if they are the less well off (and not only, not even *prima facie*, the ones that may pay for it).

Temper

University STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES entail **competition** with similar organizations for money, best academics, best students, national and local power benefits, national and international relevance or prestige.

To have the ability to promote differentiation and correspondent competitive advantages relative to other competitors.

In the case of Universities, this implies:

- Awareness of, and sensitivity to, societal challenges: social necessities (e.g., health), work market needs, main issues to foster development, implementation of social values, etc.
- Ability to build up the right teams and partnerships to carry out relevant projects.

At Universities a peculiar relation **top-down vs. bottom-up** is in place: the 'knowledge centers' and the most relevant network operate bottom-up / institutional representation and last resort decision makers act top-down.

Also, Universities have a quite complex, but not always organic, **inner structure** where a **compartmentalized** culture with 'local autonomies' tends to flourish with the loss of interdisciplinary and organic cooperation.

Universities have very **different types of population** - academics, students, researchers, non-academic staff -, sometimes with intra or inter conflicting aims and purposes.

The ability to (coordinate the) design and implementation of a internal alignment of objectives and incentives, where (at least) the most relevant University units and population groups communicate and coordinate efforts with motivated enthusiasm towards specific strategic goals.

In the case of Universities, this implies:

- Sometimes this can only be done by redesigning (part of) the University's Governance System
- All times this can only be done by implementing an adequate system of incentives.



7. *À la mode* since the 11th century (1088, Bologna) / Know how to create, maintain and develop strategic friendships

Universities are globally *à la mode*,

so they are attractors of (lots of contextual adjustable) opportunities: funds, corporations, sponsors, political power, high quality people, ...



Virtue #4: Know how to create, maintain and develop strategic friendships

The ability to spot good friends ('shareholders' for specific projects),

to be worthy of their trust, to motivate them to develop joint initiatives, and to carry out these projects fruitfully, so that each one has its fair share of it.



8. Social and Political Attractors of Futility / Good Paper Basket User

Since Universities are social and political attractors,

they are the preferential target of lots of pointless initiatives from outside and this accounts for correspondent internal 'noise', vain occupation of time and (lots of) inefficiencies.



Virtue #5: Good Paper Basket User

The ability to consider how each proposed initiative really makes a difference for the University's Mission and Objectives, and to filter out all the rest, to avoid unnecessary opportunity costs.

All these virtues are necessary, but not sufficient.

First, the academic leader has also to adjust them to her/his specific context (local & national) and institution.

Most importantly, she / he should to use them with φρόνησις and with the sense of καρός.

Arguably, this can be learned mainly by example, as an art, and not everybody will be equally good by the end of the learning process.

Obrigado!