

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

THE ART OF FACILITATION: WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A LEADER

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What are your main roles as Dean?

Before I started my current position (as the dean) at the university, I had some administrative responsibilities. I was the vice-dean between 2014 and 2017. Still, before this, I served as assistant to the department chair. I was familiar with administrative tasks, but I never forgot my academic identity. So, for me, the job was an administrative, as well as an academic one. Now for almost one year, I have been the Dean of the Graduate School of Social Science. In the past, I had ideas and goals on how to manage an academic unit, however, I could not realize them because I did not have the authority to realize these goals or to put these ideas in practice. Right now, I have the authority. I am in the key decision-making position at the graduate school (to realize the goals and ideas). In my current position, I have several different responsibilities regarding academic issues, personnel issues, financial issues, administrative issues, and the day to day functions at the graduate school.

What are the three most satisfactory things about your current role?

I think facilitating certain functions and helping the faculty or departments address their issues and contribute to their academic performance, as a result of this facilitation give me a lot of satisfaction. For example, making the department progress, like getting a good project, contribute to the promotion of the faculty, or realizing academic progress as a result of my facilitation [..]. This is the most satisfying part of my current role. I never see myself as more than a facilitator, because I cannot, and I do not want to, make decisions for my faculty members, for my departments. My understanding of academic freedom does not let me hold the entire authority in performing the academic tasks. I simply don't see myself smarter than my faculty members and departments when it comes to academic issues of the departments.

But of course, I am expecting them to persuade me, to convince me, regarding their demands. So, we have a discussion, and they have to convince me, and then I try to serve them. In this way, we accomplish something together. This is very satisfactory. For instance, we have initiated a discussion on the format of the Ph.D. dissertation at our graduate school. When it comes to academic practices and structures, we are very conservative. Even having this discussion is an accomplishment in itself. This is a strategic issue and being involved in such strategic issues rather than the daily routines is satisfactory.

I will serve in my current position for 3 years, and then I have to leave there with some accomplishments. When I work towards the accomplishments, of course I feel satisfied. However, if I feel that I am not progressing in my vision, then of course I will not feel satisfied. Also, when I feel that I am overloaded with daily routines, then I feel frustrated. I don't like to be involved in routines. But from time to time, especially at the beginning and end of the semesters, we have to deal with these routines.



Another frustrating part of this job, in Turkey at least, is that I have to mediate not only between departments and top management, but also between departments and the outside world. Also, in Turkey, because of the centralized system, you have to accommodate certain directives originating from the top, for example the Higher Education Council. And then, I have to convince the faculty about things that I am personally not convinced about. This is something that bothers me about my role as dean. For instance, when rules or regulations are changed, the faculty resists. I have to explain why we have to do this, when in fact I don't believe in it myself. It's a kind of a conflict of identity for me.

Describe the biggest change you've dealt with since you've become a Dean? How did you adapt?

I haven't achieved it yet, but my vision is to redefine the format of the Ph.D. dissertations in my unit. We are currently working on it, and I hope we will be able to accomplish it. But, as I mentioned, when it comes to the academic structure and functions, METU is a very conservative place. Therefore, accomplishing this will be a major transformation, not just a change.

We want to change the format of the Ph.D. dissertation. But we should keep in mind that in Turkey middle-level management does not have much authority, legally speaking. Hence, with this limited authority, all we can do is adjust certain academic structures. This is a highly political process at the same time. We have to negotiate with different people from different disciplines, and believe me, every discipline or department, has a totally different culture. You have to propose one thing in different ways, to different people to make them accept it, and to keep their support. This is a challenge, but a sweet challenge, I must say.

Describe a time when you demonstrated effective leadership skills?

Effective leadership skills can be demonstrated in times of conflict. For example, in times of conflict between the top and lower levels, or between two units, or two people. One thing that doesn't work in academia and, which I don't use at all, is position of power. I never try to act as a dean with my bureaucratic role or position. I always speak or use my expert power, and I speak to a collegial environment, not a bureaucratic one.

When I meditate, or resolve conflicts, or convince people of an idea I use my leadership skills. When you have a vision, you need to align the vision with the key goal and convince people to forget about their conflicts and work towards the common goals. This is what we call leadership. The rest is all management.

In Turkey, we have one problem. Unfortunately, since people do not have training in academic leadership and management, as soon as they get the position, they try to rule through their position of power. And they get a strong reaction because academia is not a place where you can rule with this type of power.



Describe your leadership style?

I am a facilitator. Of course, I listen to top management, but top management has certain goals. I try to mediate between the top and lower levels in order to contribute to the university's vision. I do not see myself more than a facilitator. Going back to the vision of the new Ph.D. I have to do it with the collaboration of the faculty. I cannot push for this, and I cannot punish people who don't agree with me. It is my responsibility, as a leader, to convince them. Then as I said, I need to facilitate their academic practices. While I am doing this, I always encourage them to take an innovative stance.

I like to progress, I don't want to preserve the things as they are right now, because everything changes in the outside world. I want my faculty to consider the international aspects of their practices. I of course, encourage this kind of understanding, but the final decision belongs to the faculty members. It's their decision, I'm only a facilitator.

"I never see myself as more than a facilitator, because I cannot, and I do not want to, make decisions for my faculty members"

What types of decisions are the most difficult for you to make? Why?

Decisions regarding conflicts between faculty members are usually unpleasant ones for me. Sometimes they sound very simple, but they are important, and you have to take them seriously. Sometimes I am stuck in between because the cases push me to act against what I believe about management and/or leadership. Sometimes, and I have never done this, you can act bureaucratically, and handle academic issues with court procedures or legal procedures. This is very challenging, and I refuse to do this. It's my style, my role, and my responsibility, and I never hesitate to use my authority in a facilitating way.

How did you sell a new idea to your management team, and what was the result?

The strongest body in our administration is the academic board, where we have all the heads of the departments. First, I always get myself informed about the issues and typically, when we discuss things, I collect information. Then I raise the issue in front of the department heads, and I ask the simple question- "What do you think?" Then it works by itself as a chemical reaction. They start to discuss amongst themselves. Of course, in some cases you cannot resolve it in a single session.

I cannot tell you that everything is homogeneous, smooth, or straightforward. For example, they will never reach a total agreement, but we usually have a good majority. It's not 51%, but a good 70-80%. When you ask people to discuss issues, it works. But you have to give it time. For major issues, you have to give sufficient time.

Another point is that you have to have a good command of your organization.

You have to be very familiar with your archives for example, previous decisions, your student profile, faculty profile, etc. This is a very important aspect of leadership. You cannot start leading a new organization by erasing the history of your unit. It is there, and you have to build on it. If it's good, build on it and progress, and if it's bad, try to redefine or change it.

How do you keep your team focused?

I involve them. On my team, I have two vice-deans and one advisor. The advisor's role is very clear and concrete. For the others, I have a distribution of tasks. The department heads are independent in their functions, but from time to time, I need certain minor things from them. I always allocate tasks, and of course, I always want to get their perspective. Because by doing so, minimize the risk of making mistakes. Our faculty is very heterogeneous. I have advisors and assistants from different disciplines. They bring their own perspective. This is also very important for eliminating the risk of making mistakes.

In which areas would you like to further develop yourself?

In short, making evidence-based decisions is very critical, for example, when you want to change certain things. (...) So having a good command of your data, archives, background, is very important. In order to understand the data, you need more time. (...) Enhancing ourselves in this area will be very critical.

How does the LEAD2 project help you to enhance your leadership skills?

I have met good leaders, strong leaders in the LEAD2 project meetings, workshops, and through the network itself. Talking to these people is in itself instructive. Of course, you also see different leadership practices from different institutions, which inspires you to think and see the issues you are confronting in your organization differently. It broadens your horizons.

For example, the LEAD2 project provides possibilities for international collaboration to widen academic practice. For example, whenever we need an international collaboration, I always refer to the LEAD2 project or the connections that I built through it. Don't forget the LEAD2 experience by itself, even without attending academic activities or workshops, is very informative. It's because you meet and collaborate with different leadership figures, and you learn from one another.

What's your view on what makes for effective leadership training and development?

I think effective leadership training and development should be two dimensional. First, you must bring good cases. The conversation and collaboration are in themselves informative for leaders, but I never underestimate the importance of formal training. In my experience, if you are not trained in management, especially organizational behavior, then you try to rule with bureaucratic power. And this doesn't work at a university. You must develop other skills, and realizing this only comes from training. In that sense, the workshops, keynote speeches, and MOOCs are always informative and instructive for current and prospective academic leaders.