

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

DARING TO BE AN ACADEMIC LEADER: CHALLENGES AND WAYS FORWARD

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, who is currently a full professor at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna, has served in many leadership positions throughout her career. She has served as vice-rector for International Affairs at Heidelberg University, is the former Dean of the Faculty for Philological and Cultural studies, and the former vice-Rector for Research and Career Development at the University of Vienna. Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik has also actively participated in various EU-China projects as a partner in the EU-China DOC project and of course the LEAD2 project, providing her knowledge and expertise in areas of University Governance, 20th-century Chinese History, and Contemporary Chinese politics. We had the pleasure of sitting down with her at the second series of the LEAD2 workshops, which took place at the University of Vienna earlier this year. She shares with us her personal experience with academic leadership as well as her views on skills and competences academic leaders should have and how to develop them.

What's the most rewarding part of leading people?

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik: I think from my own experience, the most rewarding part of leading people is when you can induce change, where change is necessary, and have people supporting you. Because some people think [they] know that something needs to be changed, but they don't think about whether or not their peers actually support them in those ideas. So, they change something, and they don't get rewarded because people don't follow them.

Describe your leadership style?

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik: I would say that I have a quite open leadership style, based on confidence in the people who are below me, who have specific knowledge in their field that is bigger than my own. I like to co-operate with those people, on the basis of trust and respect. Another aspect of my leadership style, which I think is especially important for women in leadership positions, is to think about our capability of setting an agenda. We have to clearly define what is on that agenda and then fight to convince everybody that



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our agenda is the right one [...]. Of course, you must concentrate, as you cannot have an agenda that sort of covers everything. It's important to identify the points where you want to induce change and then sort of balance [things] out. A very important aspect of [doing that] is having lots of opportunities to exchange ideas [...]. But, in the end, it is my responsibility as someone in a leadership position to make a final decision and to see that this decision is then supported by enough people so that you are not a dictator and not perceived as a dictator. [Leaders] must be able to moderate conflicting ideas about one and the same issue.

Describe a time when you demonstrated effective leadership skills?

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik : While I was the vice-rector for research[and career development]at my university, I introduced two new programs.[...]one of which was a new way of selecting our best doctoral students to receive additional financial support. This was a top-down model. The other model, a sort of bottom-up thing, was the idea of having doctoral schools. I organized this as an open-innovation process. I basically told everyone in the university that they can come up with new ideas on how to organize doctoral schools. I only gave them 5 criteria they would have to fulfill[...].In order for them to develop their ideas, we invited many people from other universities, which already have doctoral schools, to come and introduce their experience and allow our interested colleagues to ask questions and discuss[...].

More than 150 colleagues participated in this competition of ideas, and we chose eight different schools with different ideas about how to run a doctoral school. Those eight schools would have a chance to put their ideas into practice, and then after some time, we would select one or two models, that according to the university's leadership, were the most successful. I think that this is where I showed that with different leadership skills, and methods you could do different things, and I'm quite proud of this. Since I left my position, as vice-rector,[...]the rectorate decided to go in a totally different direction, which I think is okay. I also decided that I would do things differently from how people had done it in the past. People have the right and power to overrule my decisions. And I think we will see in the next years to come whether or not they made the right decision.

What's the biggest mistake you see leaders make and how can they avoid it or recover from it?

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik : First of all, I think it's very important that you always take the time to think about what you are doing. This is really a big problem[many leaders have]. No matter whether this is a leadership position in a university, a company, or a hospital, we tend to not take the time to think about what we are doing. Once you take over a leadership position, you very often feel that you have so many things to do, so many questions to answer, and so many problems to solve. You sort of go from one problem to the next, and the next, and you never stop. I think this is especially true in a university[setting], where you are co-operating with people who are very smart, who watch you all the time, intellectuals who are trained to reflect on what they are doing[...]. I think for a university, it is extremely important that people in leadership positions take the opportunity to think about what they are doing. In my case, I take the time to read a book, to watch a movie, and use this as an input for me to really reflect [...].

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What are the top three skills you think a leader needs to have and what's the best way to build them?

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik: I think the number one skill a leader should have is the ability to respect other people and to see how much they contribute to what you are doing and to really make them feel that they are part of your project[...]. The Number two skill, I think, is strategic thinking. As I said, very often we don't have time to think about what we are doing, this also includes that we often don't have time to really think about where we are now and where do we want to be[...]. In the kind of work we do with universities, if you don't move forward, then you will fall behind. So you always have to have very good knowledge of what is going on in the world, and[...]understand as much as possible about your institution, and then come up with strategic ideas. These of course, then need to be discussed with other people and refined, but you have to be the one to develop this idea. I must say that I was first trained as a professor, who would also do administrative work in the first university that granted a full professor position to me, which was the University of Heidelberg. [They] put me in all different kinds of committees and then in the senate and then in the body controlling the rectorate.

TOP 3 SKILLS

RESPECT

STRATEGIC THINKING

COMMUNICATION

There I learned to understand the university system from bottom-up, which was extremely helpful, as I was eventually able to work in a leadership position also in Heidelberg. I was very young at the time.[...]but I saw that[my colleagues]were very experienced, and I vividly remember that I observed them, and how they developed strategies for the university. And so, I was actually taught by observing and discussing with them and making decisions together with them in the rectorate. There, I learned how to think strategically. The number 3 skill is communication. I believe that a university is different from a company, a school, or a ministry because it is an institution of experts. They are very intelligent people, starting from the students, all the way up to the professors. They have an ability to observe and reflect upon things very closely [...].And for that reason, I say that the university is a discourse community and for a discourse community to actually understand that it is a discourse community, you have to allow them to be part of the discourse.[In leadership positions],we have to communicate with politicians, the bureaucracy, the public, and our students [...].So, I think these multiple levels of communication skills are definitely needed in order to do good leadership work.

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

Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik: Well, as I just said, in a European setting, we usually go through the process of learning by doing because we basically have a self-governance system. We always have professors stepping out of their research for a certain period of time to do administrative work [...].I think this is the most effective way[of leadership training and development], as the university should be aware of those people who are capable, able, and willing to do this kind of work. For example, if I talk about my own development[...],I was a member of this and that committee, from student representative to member of the senate, and this is how I became quite knowledgeable about the different leadership duties, and styles. Of course, not everyone can go through a process like this. From my point of view, this is a very rare opportunity[...].So, if you don't have this kind of opportunity, I think of course the exchange of ideas is very important. In the European system, there are lots of opportunities to exchange ideas on the same level. For example, all deans can talk to each other, or many rectors from different universities they come together and discuss. But not so often do you have a possibility for someone who is experienced to talk to younger people as [they are] not so interested in hearing what kinds of experiences we have. There is a little bit of a communication problem between experienced and not so experienced people and so I realize that universities' human resource departments see the necessity to develop these skills. But very often, they ask people from outside the university to come in and teach these skills. I don't think this outsourcing tendency is a good idea. If we understand that a university is an expert institution, then this implies that we have lots of experts who can communicate their experiences and skills to people who need this experience. Yes, sometimes they don't have a very good communicative style. In this situation, you can also bring in coaches who will help [those experts] develop a style that makes it possible for them to convey their experiences and messages to other people. This is something we actually do quite often at the University of Vienna. The university pays for a coach, who helps you for the first 3 months of your tenure, or your administrative duty. I think this is also a good way to develop leadership skills.