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Leadership Dilemmas in Australian Higher Education: A Western Australian Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This is a paper that critiques the leadership approach and leadership practices in Australian higher education. Exclusive top-down leadership and decision-making is a key feature of the version of ‘managerialism’ that is prevalent in the Australian higher education sector. The main tenet of this paper is that the classical hierarchical, top-down leadership mindset is no longer relevant in the turbulent and dynamic organizational environment confronting modern universities in Australia or overseas. We use a qualitative case study of leadership philosophy and practices at Murdoch University to argue that there is a need to reframe and reconceptualize the role of leadership in higher education. Leadership is then redefined to be an important, but not exclusive, part of the organisational strategic and operational decision-making process. The adaptability and self-organising capability of the university workforce requires an inclusive, not exclusive, decision-making methodology.

Keywords: Universities; Leadership; Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been, and still is, a ‘hot’ topic in the popular press as well as in practitioner/consultant and academic circles. A simple web search experiment using Google Scholar shows 2,950,000 plus hits for the search topic ‘leadership’ whilst there are more than 168 million hits for the same topic on Google (Google Scholar, 2008; Google, 2008). The problem is that amongst this wide range of literature, both academic and practitioner, there is no overall consensus and certainly no readily available solutions for the ‘leadership dilemma’ in modern organisations.

This paper questions and challenges a number of the prevailing viewpoints about leadership. It analyses this topical issue as part of a larger qualitative case study into decision-making processes at Murdoch University (MU). This is a paper that critiques the current leadership approach and leadership practices in Australian higher education. Exclusive top-down leadership and decision-making is a key feature of the version of ‘managerialism’ that is prevalent in the Australian higher education sector. The main tenet of this paper is that the classical hierarchical, top-down leadership mindset is no longer relevant in the turbulent and dynamic organizational environment confronting modern universities in Australia or overseas. It argues that there is a need to reframe the more negative organisational ‘reading’ and practice of leadership such that the traditional leadership/followership dualism is dissolved and reconstituted more positively and proactively in the modern university.

This paper is consequently constructed in four parts. The next briefly analyses the recent developments in the contemporary leadership literature. The second section details the background of MU case study site and informing approach. The following section proceeds to analyse and critique the practice of leadership within the MU organisational context. The
final section argues for the reframing of leadership and leadership practices within the higher education sector

**Contemporary Leadership**

The role of leaders and the practice of leadership is changing significantly. The hero-style chief executive who makes all the big/key decisions that defines an organization and sets the future path(s) is no longer relevant. The academic, practitioner and business education literatures are converging in that the notion of complex decision scenarios and environmental complexity and uncertainty necessitate team approaches and a redefinition of the role of leaders to one of coaching, support, facilitation and counselling which allows for the facilitation of a more participatory form of decision management (Thomas & Willcoxson, 1998; Ciulla, 1998; Wheatley, 1999; Bolman & Deal, 2001; Bisoux, 2002; Parry, 2002; Laszlo & Nash, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Switzer, 2003; James, 2004; Tourish, 2006; Joss, 2008).

There is also a growing wave of literature that surfaces concepts of ethical and even moral principles and forefronts for organizations, both private and public, the idea of principle-based forms of practice and decision-making (Badaracco & Ellsworth, 1989; Dalla Costa, 1998; Marshall, 2000; Malpas, 2003; Gustafsson, 2003; Lu, 2003—to name but a few). Malpas argues that in the organizational context ethics is integral and “…essentially concerns the establishment and maintenance of relationships and as such is fundamental to organizational success” (2003: 1). These notions are being extended into the area of leadership despite a prevailing notion that a leader’s sole responsibility is to find effective, pragmatic solutions to organizational problems in which ethics plays no part (Ciulla, 1998). Not only is the role of leadership being reassessed in light of ethical and moral insights but so also is the vital role of followers. The role of business educators in this process is vital and they are certainly aware of and actively promoting a ‘sea change’ in moving from an industrial to a post-industrial leadership paradigm (Bisoux, 2002).

The ‘turn’ is reflected in (some) Australian organizations as well as overseas. Michael Chaney, the recently retired Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is an exemplar of this process of leading more by example than by authority. He used Trevor Eastwood, the previous CEO, as his mentor in developing an approach in which he states, “…a team of good people can contribute a lot more than an individual” (Switzer, 2003: 43). He realised that it is more effective to use a collaborative approach embedded in an informal, collegial office atmosphere and minimising the negative aspects of a traditional leader’s “…huge ego” (2003:
A collaborative approach to leadership is an organizational shift in the right direction (Avery, 1999).

Despite the growing movement to a more enlightened approach to the management and leadership of contemporary organizations it is still evident that by far the majority of organizations do not subscribe to this reframed worldview. It raises the puzzling conundrum as to why there are still so many traditionally focussed organizations in both the private and public sectors. The speculative answers provided in Boyett and Boyett range from resistance to an organizational cultural change from an emphasis on individuality to one of a collective nature; the team approach being perceived as too time consuming, risky and inefficient; managers feeling threatened by a loss of control, status and responsibility; and, even that the transition from a traditional to high performing organization is simply too hard to accomplish and sustain (1998: 140-141).

More important, we argue, is the need to ensure that the key negative elements are countered effectively. These are the current imbalance in organizational power relations; executive self-interest often embedded in executive compensation and performance bonus schemes; and, (large) managerial egos. In addition, the Miller et al findings about any proposed ‘quantum’ organizational change that such “…upheavals threaten the rewards, reputations, and power of elite executives” (1997: 73) needs to be taken into account. It is critical, therefore, that there are internal ‘champions’ for just such a change throughout an organization from the top to the bottom (Knight, 1987; Nah et al, 2001; Dean, 2004). What will be critical to this move is the development of the right level of motivation and the effective alignment of both management self-interest and organizational interests. Then such a deep move becomes more feasible.

Leadership in this scenario will need to be exercised at all organizational levels to ensure a successful transition to what Ciulla (1998) argues is ‘true’ empowerment in a process of real commitment to sincerity and authenticity. Wheatley views this as a natural move to

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1 A number of selected quotes captures this shift in the contemporary role of leadership:

Leadership today is about values, working with people, building consensus. It’s about thinking about a greater good than yourself. It’s not about the guy on the white horse anymore (Ciulla - Chair of Leadership and Ethics – Jepson School at the University of Richmond, cited in Bisoux, 2002: 29).

Leadership, among other things, is about empowering people to manage themselves. And it’s about using one’s personal power to win the hearts and minds of people to achieve a common purpose (Gill - Director, MBA in Leadership Studies – University of Strathclyde, cited in Bisoux, 2002: 29).

There has been a huge shift in our thinking. Our tendency has always been to look to an individual for leadership. But now there’s an understanding that leadership is not always correlated with positions of power and authority. It is something that can come from anywhere in an organization or community. It can manifest itself in many different ways (Alexander - President, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, cited in Bisoux, 2002: 28)
autonomy and self-determination but uses a scientific underpinning of chaos theory and quantum mechanics to explain the need to do so (1999). We would argue in favour of this move more from a pragmatic as well as an intellectual base. Organizations that have taken this path (in varying degrees) have out-performed their competitors.2

Strategically agile and the newly successful organizations will be essentially self-organizing systems that progress and succeed through initiative and self-control with little or no need for intervention from senior management. The role of the leader(s) becomes reconceptualized as one of facilitation and championing the new decision-making paradigm (Purser & Cabana, 1998; Pasternack & Viscio, 1998; Garratt, 2000; Hope & Fraser, 2003).

Effective leadership is still vital to current and future organizations but is now redefined from the more traditional ‘command and control’ approach to a ‘coach, consult and guide’ role that maximises the human potential of the whole workforce not just an elite coterie at the top of an organizational pyramid (Joss, 2008).

Case Study Site and Organisational Background

Murdoch University Murdoch University (MU) is a research intensive medium-sized university in Australia first established in 1972. Murdoch University (MU) is one of four public universities and one private university located in Perth, Western Australia.3 The University is the smallest in size of the public universities with three campuses: the main campus at South Street and satellites Rockingham and Peel. The University has a high, national reputation for its teaching quality and research quantum. The institution like many others is strategically positioning itself within the series of reforms to higher education that the current federal government has brought in during the last decade.

The University consists of sixteen schools within which there are usually several discipline groupings. There is a Dean who is the Head of School in charge of the administrative and academic responsibilities within each of these designated academic organisational units (AOUs). The schools are then aggregated into six faculties under a Faculty Dean—the majority of these faculty Deans have been appointed from within academic ranks but two come from an administrative background. The university has been growing steadily in student numbers and equivalent full time students over the past two decades—it currently has

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2 Examples of successes include: AT&T Credit Corporation; Federal Express; Weyerhauser; Motorola; Kodak; Hewlett-Packard; GE Appliances; Eli Lilly and Knight-Ridder (Boyett and Boyett 2000: 138-139). Similar experiences exist in other parts of the world particularly in Europe and would include Svenska Handelsbanken, Borealis, Asea Brown Boveri, Syncrude Chemicals and Sequoia Oil (Purser & Cabana, 1998; Pasternack & Viscio, 1998; Garratt, 2000; Hope & Fraser, 2003).

3 The other universities are the University of Western Australia (the oldest); Curtin University (with a technology focus); Edith Cowan University (the newest with a teaching and applied research focus) and the University of Notre Dame (a private Catholic university).
an enrolment of over sixteen thousand students. The majority of students are non-school leavers forming nearly sixty percent of the student population (Murdoch University, 2008).

In addition there are a number of administrative divisions each currently managed by a Deputy Vice Chancellor\(^4\). The university has a Vice Chancellor as the top bureaucratic officer of the institution. S/he is effectively the organisational chief executive officer (CEO). S/he reports to the university governing body (the Senate) headed by the Chancellor who is usually an eminent member of the public\(^5\). The University is not unusual or unique in having this type of organisational structure.

**Participant Data Collection**

The sample for the qualitative case study component of this paper was a group of fifteen interview participants selected from across the different community groups within Murdoch University. They included a mix of students, academic staff, administrative staff and members of senior management—two of the interviewees were members of the senior executive group and two others were senior administrative staff members. The actual interviews were conducted between October 2004 and February 2005\(^6\).

The sample group was a non-probabilistic purposive or judgemental sampling whereby the participants involved in this study were chosen from the existing organisational networks of the author (Neuman, 2000: 198). This sampling method used those existing social networks and was built upon these relationships. It also allowed *opportunistic observations* of happenings that occurred before, during and after interviews. The participants were known to the author who was often present and interacted with them—in different organisational and social contexts—for extended periods of time which went well beyond the interview times. As a result the participants were observed in different organisational scenarios over lengthy periods of time.

Respondent data was collected through the use of an in-depth semi structured interview. Each interview was planned to last approximately one hour and each was tape recorded with the written consent of the participant. After each interview was completed the data was transcribed from the tape onto separate word processed documents. Secondary archival data was also collected from diverse sources such as annual reports; electronic sources; official

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\(^4\) This is a recent organisational move implemented in 2006. During the period primarily analysed in this paper the title was Pro Vice Chancellor.

\(^5\) The current Chancellor is Mr. Terry Budge who has a commercial background in the banking sector. He used to be the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of BankWest in Western Australia.

\(^6\) In this study the author has been an academic staff member of the Murdoch Business School for more than eighteen years which brings also a depth of ethnographic richness to the analysis of the events and leadership practices within the institution.
university minutes; official and publicly available university documents; and, email communications.

**Interviews**

All participants interviewed were volunteers and the prime research method was open-ended semi-structured, conversational interviews. This approach can be classified as a variation of conventional anthropological ethnography, which has been adapted to this case study of decision-making and organisational culture at Murdoch University.

An interview or conversation with a purpose is an art rather than a skill (Berg, 1995: 29). Berg refers to three distinct types of interviews: standardized interviews in which the questions scheduled are formally structured; a non-standardized interview which does not have a schedule of formal questions and does not know what primary questions to ask and tends to be highly exploratory in nature; and, a semi-standardized—or semi-structured—interview which allows the researcher to use broadly predetermined questions and topics (1995: 33). This study used the last type. The semi-structured interview was used to keep the conversation within the framework of the subject of study. The same planned questions were utilised as much as possible to assist the respondent to concentrate on the central issues but additional questions and variations were used depending on the flow of the conversation during the interview. In addition, a semi-structured interview gave an opportunity for the respondents to raise additional relevant themes.

**Murdoch University Participant Perceptions and Reflections**

Once again the MU participants tended to favour responses that were redolent of the more traditional views of leaders in organizations. This was not unexpected given that few of the interviewees had any deep exposure—in practice or academically—to the ongoing debates in the literature about the nature and purpose of organizational leadership. We had posed two specific questions that were aimed at eliciting responses about organizations in general and not just about their experiences at MU—which is analysed in the next chapter. The two questions relevant to this section were: 1) *Explain the difference between the role(s) of*

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7 This style of interviewing is a compromise between unstructured and highly structured interview techniques. While unstructured interviews (those without particular questions) tend to reveal a broad range of information which can be difficult to analyse, highly structured interviews (such as those in a face to face survey) may not elicit any insightful information because the right questions may not have been asked. Thus, the semi structured interview gives the researcher and interviewee some degree of direction while, at the same time, empowering the interviewee to pursue their own agendas—other topics of special interest and/or concern that are related to decision-making at Murdoch University.

8 This is to be expected given that their organizational experience was mainly limited to a centralised bureaucracy such as Murdoch University within which the ‘managerialism’ approach is dominant as it is in the rest of the university sector in Australia.
managers and leaders generally? 2) What do you feel should be the role of leaders and managers in a modern organization?

The responses again ranged quite widely. In response to the first question most did distinguish between leaders and managers although many believed that it was possible to combine these roles. Elizabeth although not liking the use of a military analogy of a leader stated that: “I hate it with a vengeance but I really do think, you know, that’s the person who stands at the front of the troops” (personal communication, 2004). Dominic provide a similar perspective: “I would argue that a leader is somebody who quite literally leads from the front, provides good ideas, provides inspiration, provides perspiration as well” (personal communication, 2004). Elaine though distinguished roles at different levels when stating:

I mean the leader’s job is to set the direction⁹…there’s various leadership roles within the hierarchy…you’ve got to have a small L leader and that can be the team leader in the same way I suppose that I provide leadership to the troops here (Elaine, personal communication, 2004).

Eric was more concise in stating: “I mean the leader is telling us where to go and why…” (personal communication, 2004). As is evident from these statements the main viewpoint was of a leader at the forefront—more of the traditional heroic leadership role rather than the one we would advocate, that of facilitation and support.

When queried further about what ‘should be’ the role of a leader in a contemporary organization the answers were similar to the ones detailed above but focussing more on the notions of inspiration and commitment to the organization. This was best captured in Martin’s response:

Well a leader’s got to inspire us…and has to be squeaky clean…and to be perceived fair and…no longer on a corruption gravy train or any of that kind of stuff and that’s really, really important I think. A leader has to obviously as well…let me rephrase that…a leader has to be obviously committed to the organisation (Martin, personal communication, 2004).

One of the more thoughtful responses came from Yolande who argued cogently that:

For me leadership is something inspired, leadership is the role that somebody plays when they add to, they value add to an institution by their participation and their presence. They are concerned to grow, to problem solve, they are concerned to hear, to take…it’s like nurture, it’s like mothering or parenting…you take what you’ve got and you work with it to make it into something much better…Now I know the business world ain’t ever going to use a parenting analogy for leadership but as a [inaudible] that’s the one that works for me. It’s about responsible parentship, parenting (Yolande, personal communication, 2005).

The two closest responses that did touch on the notions of wider participation came firstly from Amber who stated that: “A leader is somebody who, regardless of their actual

⁹ I would argue that in fact there is also a need to debate openly the direction, current and future, that the organization should take. Otherwise this form of leadership implies a ‘father figure’ approach in which followers play a very limited role.
hierarchical position, would refer on ideas, encourage utilising the strength of different people that they're working with in order to achieve goals” (personal communication, 2004). Sheila on the other used the example of Michael Chaney the CEO of Wesfarmers—the largest and most successful contemporary Western Australian company—when giving an example of a modern successful leader.

He appears to have brought Wesfarmers along and I did have a bit of an insight into Wesfarmers…I think he was one that allowed people to...he employed good people, he paid them well and he allowed them to make decisions and if they made the wrong decisions then obviously he had to deal with it but he always allowed people to make mistakes…I think he had faith in his people… (Sheila, personal communication, 2004).

Again it is clear from these responses that for a major change program to work effectively then the prevailing notions of leadership held by organizational members need to be reconceptualised extensively. The same processes advocated earlier in the section on organizational culture will have to apply here and should also be used in the following sections on managership and followership. This means that existing organizational members will need extensive awareness raising, appropriate training and professional development and expert facilitation in redefining the role and practice of leadership.

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT – CURRENT PRACTICE AND FUTURE HOPE

The prevalent senior executive mindset favours a market forces, economic rationalist, top-down decision making approach to university management in Australia and overseas (Bessant 2002; Thornton 2004; Yelder & Codling 2004; Eveline 2004; Holloway 2004a, 2004b; Holloway & Holloway 2005; Tourish 2006). Handy (1986) asserts that organizations are over-managed and under-led. This is certainly the case with universities because many academic leaders have merely ‘gravitated into managerial roles at the expense of any real leadership [experience]’ (Yelder & Codling 2004: 320). The evidence in the literature is quite clear that managerialism has led to the corporatisation of universities in Australia and overseas. This corporatisation trend has been blamed for diverse and negative outcomes including creating an overall “climate of fear” (Bessant, 2002) and even “corrosive leadership” resulting in:

...the perception by managers that they are a new elite whose role is to increase productivity and maximise limited resources through constant surveillance and auditing has contributed to the normalisation of a corrosive form of leadership (Thornton, 2004: 23).

Given the claims of a ‘climate of fear’ amongst university staff (Bessant 2002)—partially we would argue from an over-management syndrome—my assessment is that a significant,

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10 Additional analysis and arguments are canvassed in Appendix A which reinforce these findings.
quantum level of organizational change is necessary to embed any form of collaborative decision-making approach.

There have been case studies in tertiary sector change management decision-making which include major, or what Miller, Greenwood and Hinings (1997) refer to as quantum, restructuring changes (Glendon 1992; Ritter 1998) to major change management in Murdoch University (van Rhyn and Holloway 2004). The common theme in these studies is a top-down, authoritarian approach to decision-making. Glendon studied major longitudinal change—over an eight year period—of size reduction at Aston University in the UK where he was an academic at the time. The change process was a “…top-down change strategy” (1992: 67) driven primarily by the Vice-Chancellor “…a single key actor” (1992: 67). The process involved “…controlling resources and information flows and by managing uncertainty…with a virtual power vacuum beneath him…” (Glendon, 1992: 67).

Ritter (1998) was an Australian study of the creation of Charles Sturt University through the amalgamation of Riverina Murray Institute of Higher Education and the Mitchell College of Advance Education. She concluded that this was also a top-down change approach in which “…those driving it seek speed and efficiency to achieve homogeneity and central strength” (1998: 77) at the cost of consultation and effective consolidation. Ritter argued that this approach was perceived (by management) as offering “…effective strategies for achieving ends despite cultural constraints, but exacerbated negative staff reactions through interpretations of it in terms of power play and the pursuit of self-interest” (1998: 86).

The creation of the Murdoch Business School was another example of a top-down management driven change exercise (van Rhyn & Holloway, 2004). The basic idea promulgated by the then Executive Dean was to force the amalgamation of the School of Commerce and the School of Economics. Significant resistance from the affected staff plus intervention from other Heads of School and the staff union allowed for a more consultative process to carry through the ultimate change outcomes (2004: 8). The study concluded that the best approach to such change “…is one that actively involves all staff…allows full ownership…and engagement…and minimises the need to overcome resistance to change…” (van Rhyn & Holloway, 2004: 9).

Further papers in the areas of university leadership and governance as well as strategic and operational decision-making have come to similar conclusions (Baldwin, 1996; Bessant, 2002; Newton, 2002; Yielder & Codling, 2004; Holloway, 2004a, 2004b; Eveline 2004; Thornton, 2005, 2004). Even nine hundred years of self-government by the respective colleges at Oxford University is coming to an end (Halpin, 2005). The Vice-Chancellor Professor John Hood—who was the VC at Auckland University in New Zealand—has argued
that centralisation is “…necessary to modernise decision-making and maintain Oxford’s world-class status” (Halpin, 2005: 29). This is a classical attempt—through the artificial creation of uncertainty and some notion of external ‘threats’ to the future of the institution—to implement an agenda of corporatisation and managerialism where devolution and delegation of decision-making was previously the norm. It is clearly evident that corporatisation and managerialism is pervasive in the higher education sector in Australia and overseas.

There are, however, some examples—few and far between—in the higher education literature of calls for a more collaborative/collective approach to governance, change management and decision-making (Stagich 1999; Hellstrom 2003; Holloway 2004a, 2004b; Yelder & Codling 2004; Holloway and van Rhyn 2005). These are embedded within a wider literature in which effective groups—instead of just individuals with a common interest—acting in a coordinated and organised manner in a collective action process increase the net organizational benefits (Olasen 1967; North 1990; Ostrom 1990).

Is it possible to change this current top-down authoritarian decision-making phase within the university sector? Yes it is. Tourish questions whether ‘…demoralization and disempowerment [can] really produce a clever country?’ (2006: 27). His argument is that the Howard government in Australia is to blame for the policies that have produced this particular version of managerialism in Australian universities and that this approach ‘…embodies the folk wisdom of an untrained supervisor in a mid-19th-century textile factory’ (2006: 27).

Tourish posits a threefold solution to enable universities to do what most effective organizations actually do. Firstly, improve employment security by increasing the percentage of staff with ongoing (tenured) employment relationships. Secondly, decentralise decision-making by providing the workforce with greater autonomy and discretion. Thirdly, improve pay and encourage trade union organization because: ‘Higher pay attracts the brightest and the best, and is a characteristic of businesses that manage to sustain top performance over an extended period. Individual contracts tend to reduce the median level of pay while undermining the team spirit central to organizational success’ (2006: 27).

This approach embodies the results of extensive research in the human resource management and organizational behaviour fields into entities that can be classified as high performing work organizations (HPWOs). These have outperformed their rivals over long periods of time (Pfeffer 1998; Collins & Porras 2000; O’Reilly & Pfeffer 2000; Collins 2001; Reichfield 2001; Thompson 2002; Tourish & Hargie 2004). These organizations are characterised by good communication processes; semi-autonomous work teams; effective employee participation; enhanced organizational commitment; high levels of training (for staff and
managers); and, performance based rewards. High on this list is effective and open communication (Tourish 2005) and the importance of commitment (Burton & O'Reilly 2000; Hannan, Baron, Hsu & Kocak 2000). This research also argues strongly that decision-making improves in a climate of debate, discussion and dissent (Tourish 2005: 487).

Open information flows in organizations are vital. Wheatley puts this cogently:

*We have no desire to let information roam about promiscuously, procreating where it will, creating chaos. Management’s task is to enforce control, to keep information contained, to pass it down is such a way that no newness occurs. Information chastity belts are a central management function* (emphasis added). The last thing we need is information running loose in our organisation...

But if information is to function as a source of organisational vitality, we must abandon our dark clouds of control and trust in its need for free movement, even in our organisations. Information is necessary for new order, an order we do not impose, but order nonetheless. All of life uses information this way (1999: 97).

The above approach needs to be combined with both two-way and critical upward communication flows. Organizational success and improved decision-making relies on this otherwise ‘…management teams become out of touch with their people and underestimate or miss emerging problems…’ (Tourish 2005: 485). The result is that more than half the decisions in organizations fail largely because of insufficient participation and ineffective communication (Nutt 2002).

**CONCLUSION**

If these ‘lessons’ are understood to be part of an effective organizational learning process then universities can be proactive and ensure that they do effectively utilise all the embedded talent represented by their staff. The result would be enhanced and more robust organizational decision outcomes as well as a more engaged and committed workforce.

Many of these involve ‘moves’ towards ideas of workforce empowerment in which employees assume some or full measure of autonomy and discretion over what they do and how they do it (Mirvis 1997; Ashmos & Duchon 2000; Pfeffer 2001). This does raise a certain paradox. It is common for management consultants and senior management personnel to advocate work approaches that include greater participation and involvement by employees. The subsequent propositions often contain their own internal contradictions because they create programs ‘…whose successful implementation depends upon the use of hierarchy, unilateral control, and employee limited freedom’ (Argyris 2001: x). Tourish and Hargie cogently argue that this is often limited to those at the top receiving just enough corrective input to the decision-making process. They state that: ‘A unitarist focus is simply
assumed, and a top-down strategy recommended – as part of the attempt to move organizations beyond top-down strategies’ (2004a: 6).

Finally, universities need to move away from the ‘heroic leadership’ template and embrace a true workforce empowerment approach (Ciulla 1998; Bisoux 2002; James 2004). Eveline (2004) identified that university leadership was primarily hierarchical, top-down, detached and mostly male. However there was a strong layer of informal leadership which she described as ‘invisible and ivory basement leadership’ occurring at lower levels amongst general and academic staff. This type of ‘post-heroic’ leadership places greater value on personal relationships, teaching, loyalty and particularly collaborative innovation (Eveline 2004: 1-5). There is hope for the future—even universities can aspire to become HPWOs.
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Managers/Leadership MU Participant Responses

Questions 1 and 2 – 1) Are you satisfied with your managers/leaders? Why/Why not? 2) Explain your understanding of the role of management and leadership as practiced at MU within your personal experience?

Martin was quite specific and scathing:

Well I think we had a series of pretty lousy managers when Senior Manager A [ex Vice Chancellor] was around and I also think in terms of managing an operation Senior Manager B has to be noted for one of the bad ones. I think...and certainly looking back Senior Manager C was a disaster as a manager both from a budget point of view and also some of the contracts we got into that he signed off on you know fifty year contracts we’re going to live with (Martin, personal communication, 2004).

Dominic on the other hand was less scathing and did argue for MU having had a variety of experiences:

I think we’ve oscillated wildly at times between management and leadership. Some of the leaders I think haven’t been leaders including some of our vice chancellors. Some others of our vice chancellors have been dramatic leaders, dreadful managers. Some others have been both good leaders and good managers and I think that’s par for the course (personal communication, 2004).

Elizabeth’s focus was more pensive as follows: “I’m visualising…and I’m not obviously going to quote names but one I see as being a most dreadful leader in terms of their capacity constantly to alienate absolutely everybody” (personal communication, 2004).

Anna put this very specifically as:

Let me talk about the managers that I know well so Person A for instance and Person B who were managers [Heads of School] and were to be seen very much as leaders of groups of people and I don’t think they did either job particularly well and I think the reason they didn’t do either job particularly well, they did not…they just don’t like people very much and people didn’t like them very much and I think that they didn’t have care for the group of people that they were working with (personal communication, 2004).

Elaine’s interpretation of this communication and people skills problem was stated as follows:

The leaders have always been people with incredible intellect but not necessarily any practical skills and their people skills...I don’t know, there’s something about Vice Chancellors, they seem to be a bit short on the people skill side… don’t know how to manage people terribly well, they tend to be impatient and they’ve got a lot of stuff, not a lot of time, you know you get more from their body language than you get from their mouth, that sort of thing (personal communication, 2004).

Elaine then went on to state that she was not ready to once again train the next group of upcoming middle and senior management echelons:

Yeah and the person still standing at the end of the day that was attending all the senior exec meetings was me and you know I reckon it was one of the contributing factors to me leaving was just thinking I cannot go through a set of...or training up another set of PVCs and executive deans in things that are my bread and butter, you know things, like what’s the regulatory environment in which we operate, how does MU operate, how does the budget work, you know, what’s their role in responding to academic council or the senate or whatever… (personal communication, 2004).
On the other hand, Eric saw the current state of affairs as reflective of the degree of personal ambition, which appears according to his experience to be more and more evident in the University sector, arguing that:

…if you’ve got a good leader then a good leader is one who never counts the cost themselves, always puts the institution first. Now I’m not sure that we have too many of those sort of people right now so I think of their…you know when it comes to personal qualities I think there’s some of them, and I could say who...some of them really fall short of that mark and I feel they’re there because of personal ambition not because of what they’re going to contribute to the university and that’s a great sadness too (personal communication, 2004).

Another comment tends to capture the general feeling of a move away from a more collegially oriented model of management:

Well my guess is that many academics looking at our managers would see them moving into increasingly into the corporate style of management, you know, you just have to look around the back of numerous chairs at Senate; see all black suits. Nothing but black suits or dark blue, and some woman might be there, and then chances are she’ll have a black dress on: so we’re run by the suits now (Martin, personal communication, 2004).

Yolande went on to identify a concern over the male oriented culture in the organization:

Their organisational culture is not the same as the university’s organisational culture…because it became very evident in the research that we were doing on gender in organisational culture. They have a quite different way of talking about what the university is and what it should be from the way the troops talk about what...the very word troop, you know, we kept...when we interviewed the senior management about gender and organisational culture, what we got from them was a story that was full of sporting analogies, you know? The university...there are only X number of real players out on the field doing [playing] the game and the rest are the audience to it, they are in the stands, they’re the spectators. The trouble with the university said one senior manager to us was that all the spectators have got whistles and think that they can blow them and [have] something to do with the game, you know? There is a huge gulf, they actually don’t see themselves as us, as coming from us or as part of us, and you can see where I put myself, I’m not part of that group. Having said that you’re saying that it’s part of that culture, it’s very difficult to be other in that culture. For quite practical reasons, because they’re all temporary, they’re only there for a short period of time so the kind of investment they might have in the institution or that I might have as a tenured staff member of this...it matters to me that the institution is healthy. It doesn’t necessarily matter to them to quite the same depth as it does me because they’re going somewhere else, their tenure in the job is limited for their...what drives them is the need to make us blush at this point in time, to...you know to be visible, to be seen to be...being successful (personal communication, 2005).

**Question 3 – What would you change (if you could) in the behaviour, performance and role(s) of managers and leaders in MU?**

Teresa verbalised this as follows:

I think there’s very much...the only thing that I would say of the people that are currently the leaders and managers is there seems to have been this view that they have to change everything and there seems to be a bit of a lack of respect if you like of institutional knowledge because I think they feel that institutional knowledge is such because it won’t change (personal communication, 2004).

The primary change identified was for senior managers to extend themselves beyond their narrow fields of personal ambition and to embrace effective organizational commitment and thereby ensure ‘better’ decision outcomes. Nellie put this as:

They have to like take a break and think ‘right what is good for MU instead of what is good for me’. Now they might deny that, they might deny that that’s what they’re really after. I believe that a lot of our managers now are in the game for themselves and because of that it is not doing MU any good, now
again generalising because I can think of a few who are really believing that this is for the good of TI. They’re just too ambitious (personal communication, 2004).

Yolande also argued cogently from a similar viewpoint:

Look, it is a funny...I’d like them to be like me...or like any of the people around the place that I can name who have got integrity, who aren’t in it for ego, who are in it because they want a good outcome...

I’d like people who are prepared to take problems seriously and find proper solutions to them, not easy solutions to them, not glib, quick solutions but really prepared to solve a problem, to try and find a way through competing needs, because competing needs happen all the time but try to find a way through competing needs to an outcome that is going to do least harm to most people and be productive and creative and constructive (personal communication, 2005).

Kenneth identified that there had been a reduction from a more inclusive approach to decision-making to a more pronounced degree of management hegemony. He stated that:

And what I’ve seen only in the few years that I’ve been here is a gradual eroding of student and academic voices within that...not significantly but slowly the numbers of senior execs or the high level managers on those committees grow...they did decrease in the [inaudible 320] and slowly you’re slipping towards...the voices of the management becoming louder and I’m not saying the others are silenced, I’m just saying that there’s less voices so I mean I’ve seen that happen (personal communication, 2004).

Yolande saw what was happening as a “I of teamwork” and the open exercise of personal power and control over decision-making. She first stated that:

They call themselves a team, of course they do but they’re a team against the rest of us. And they are, you know, they practise all those arts you know, they practise the art of not speaking freely to people, of having secrets, of agreeing amongst themselves not to discuss with other people decisions which are in camera and confidential (personal communication, 2005).

She went on to elucidate the following as an exemplar of the organizational pressures within Murdoch University that encourage a top-down approach to decision-making:

I’m not sure, I’m not sure how I would want to...want to think it through. I think you can be a lot blunter than perhaps the Foucauldian account of power might do although it’s a product of the [management] culture, it’s a product...you know they are immersed in a decision making work environment where what they do is they make decisions. They need to...the nature of the work, it’s high powered, there’s a lot of it...their entire...there’s only 24 hours in a day. When you’re immersed in that kind of thing of course things like trying to control communication flow, not taking time to go and check out you know that there may be another way of thinking about, exchanging...it becomes incredibly difficult...but it’s also part of just sheer I can do this (personal communication, 2005).

**Question 4 – Do you know any informal leaders in MU? What do they do that makes them informal leaders?**

The comment from Martin captures this best:

I’m sure there are some and if I thought about it long enough I’d probably think of something because most of the people who have become leaders within the...have ended up school head or something like that so they end up with some kind of a formal position. I actually think there’s also lots of different ways in which people do things (personal communication, 2004).

Elizabeth was clearer in identifying the positive behaviours of informal leaders although she starts by saying that:

I think they are diminishing commodity...I think you’ve heard me use this expression before, the capacity to see around corners and maybe just another name for the old fashioned mentor of staff, natural mentor rather than formal mentor, may simply be individuals who have had a breadth of
experience and are happy on invitation to share some of that knowledge (personal communication, 2004).

Nellie phrased this as:

To me the informal leader [inaudible 352] leader would...will listen to them and even communicate with other people to try and find out if those problems are in reality existing and they will try to find a way of turning the complaint into a positive, getting an input from those people and turning it back on them and say okay you [are] complaining about this, how would you like to see it improved?

They are seen as involving others in the decision processes and as Yolande argues it is about:

...intelligent management, you know, his contributions are thought through and for that reason he has influence. I actually think you know...there are lots of little leaders from the bottom up, it’s whenever somebody does their homework, commits to figuring out a solution and is prepared to beat that solution out (personal communication, 2005).