"Improving Humanity Through Purposive Leadership in Higher Education"

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Abstract

This article reflects on "Improving Humanity" and how to implement it as the primary purpose of higher education. The article includes conversational references to items of current literature and concepts of leadership/barriers to successful leadership. Historical perceptions of purposive leadership are discussed through the metaphor of Newton's Laws of Physics in juxtaposition of evolving technology, cultural expectations, and schools of thought over the past few decades. The article concludes with discussions of Artificial General Intelligence, Multi-Helix Models, Illocutionary Acts, Law of Returns to Scale, and Open Innovation.

Keywords: purposive higher education leadership improving humanity

Introduction:

As an example of good things taking place in higher education these days, at the January 29, 2020 pre-conference meeting of the "Universities of Louisiana *For Our Future*" conference, UL System president Dr. Jim Henderson emphasized his vision that the overall work of higher education is to improve humanity. Being in agreement with that vision, my leadership colleagues and I here at Louisiana Tech University were inspired to discuss what those details might look like. Considering that the conference was less than a month ago as of this writing, our conversations are still fledgling, but what we lack in longevity, we make up for in frequency: we have talked pretty much daily over lunch at the University's Ropp Center. In such places, fertile ideas can quickly sprout growth. Advertisers the world over agree that the most credible recommendations come from spontaneous comments among peers during informal gatherings (Guest, August 12, 2016). Inauspicious as they may be, it's possible to get some top-quality information and teambuilding strategies during informal events like our lunches.

It's important to note that my colleagues and I are all experts in leadership and collective human effectiveness, but I should divulge that we come at it through differing schools of thought. Our day-jobs are in education, athletics, psychology, and computer science. No matter our differences, the assumption behind all our conversations certainly involves translating thinking into action through the implementation of an organized, intentional plan. The primary point upon which we mostly agree is that a plan without implementation is a daydream. Like everything else, an organization can either evolve or die, and evolution requires change. Our first observation is that improving humanity involves thinking and talking, which people tend to enjoy, but it also involves implementation in the form of changes in practice and the revised sharing of divided resources, which people tend to not enjoy.

Purposive Implementation:

Being experts in human effectiveness, my colleagues and I know a few things about implementation as supported through longstanding reviews of literature. First, regardless of the originating school of thought, all successful models of implementation are consistent with three things: strong, engaged leadership; positive attitudes; and willing involvement. Literature over time has supported this pattern of success (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Mitchell, et al., 1999). Further, literature is consistent in that, when plans include formal guidance for implementation, they are typically much more successful than strategy that lacks official expectations during post-planning, implementation phases. In other words, people in authority need to remain directly involved. A review of literature shows that failures during a plan's implementation phase typically occur in one or more of three regular ways:

1. All the leadership energy goes into planning and none of it goes into implementation, as if the plan is so good that implementation should naturally take care of itself (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Policano, 2016; Thompson & Strickland, 1995)
2. Workers are hesitant or unwilling to cooperate (Cadwallader, S., Jarvis, C. B., Bitner, M.J., & Ostrom, A.L., 2010; Fogg, 1999; Mitchell, et al., 1999)
3. Management's lack of sustained involvement allows the details of implementation to evaporate (Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Policano, 2016; Thompson & Strickland, 1995).

To this list of three things, most of my colleagues and I add a fourth item specifically relating to the concept of improving humanity—people tend concentrate on what's wrong and not on what we can do. Henry Mintzberg (1993) specifically addresses this tendency by asking why managers would focus on things we can't control. In terms of improving humanity, examples of uncontrollable variables are national or international turbulence. The Serenity Prayer notwithstanding, we need to concentrate upon those levels of turbulence we can navigate, like local turbulence. This concept is relevant to purposive leadership because turbulence is so fundamental to theories of human existence that it will always exist. The question isn't about why it's there, but rather about how much we can realistically do about it. In any situation where the environment is constantly changing (turbulence), organizations require a systematic way to minimize the destructive parts without hampering upward evolution. Mintzberg places his focus upon learning from change, not upon controlling it. My colleagues and I agree.

This is a delicate balance to maintain during acts of implementation because learning is adaptive, while by contrast, implementation is inflexible. For that reason, we like the word "purposive" rather than "purposeful" because it focuses on the activity more than on the plan.

It's true that achieving success requires staying the course without getting distracted, but this can be in direct opposition to the spirit of inquiry and invention which we hope is inherent throughout higher education. How else are we to improve humanity? As if conundrums such as these don't complicate things enough, another giant in the business of strategic management, Peter Drucker, famously summarized the paradox of human improvement by saying, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," (an expression so common that we can't find an original citation).

Leaders are not Explorers:

Travel without a directional purpose is called wandering, and while wandering has many valuable qualities for exploration and recreation, it is the opposite of staying the course. The business of improving humanity requires leadership, which we conversationally identify by a couple of qualities:

1. To describe someone as "leading" implies that at least one other person is following, and like all successful leader-follower situations, two things are necessary: first, everyone involved knows of a place worth going, and second, they all want to get there. Migrant peoples have always had one thing in common: they did not voluntarily leave a place where they wanted to remain.
2. Also imbedded in our assumptions is that the word "leader," includes the root word, "lead," which inherently means people in charge go first. In other words, when engaging in the purposive leadership of improving humanity, we cannot send somebody ahead to clear the way, nor can we linger on high ground with a clear view watching what goes on before deciding which path to take. To this second point, when trying to implement change, it's always a good idea to avoid nesters, but ironically, the people who tout the loudest need for change may be among the most comfortable people alive. The world has plenty of "leaders" who want movement without friction, which (as any student of physics will tell you) is literally impossible.

3. The business of improving humanity will no doubt involve elected officials, and, sadly, this seems to be the group that is most reactive to the movement-without-friction enigma because either they seem to avoid friction or they pursue it. Both of these extremes come at the expense of the greater good in the middle.

Charting the Course:

In spite of the get-up-and-go tone I seem to have adopted for this article, my colleagues and I all agree that finding a place worth going is an act of deliberate research that should not be understated. Like any act of genuine research, this kind of fact-finding must take place outside of our own heads. Understanding may come from within our brains, but the facts that produce comprehension do not. Inducing that logic, it makes sense that acts of collective research must take place outside our organizations because otherwise we are likely to be overly imbedded in habit and tradition. "CEO's are looking into the proverbial rearview mirror when they really need binoculars." (Reeves, 2018, p. 64).

A great place to begin fact-finding is comparison among institutions that have achieved the types of goals we desire to achieve. Policano (2016) advocates a strategic process to address concerns regarding concepts of leadership. Among the things we like about Policano's process is that the first step is to define external realities. Similarly, Mankins and Steele (2005) offer suggestions for closing formulation-implementation gaps, and forefront on their list of steps is to identify and debate our assumptions.

We also agree with researchers such as Beer and Eisenstat who, as far back as 2000, attribute the concept of scope creep as blocking implementation. To what these researchers recommend, we would add an increasing need to consider temporal measurements (how far into the past you should dig, and how far into the future you should reach). Zeitgeist demands for immediacy these days have elevated temporal concerns to unpresented levels of immediacy.

Talk of activity:

Logophiles that we are during our lunchtime gatherings, we study not only what gets said on the big-screen television playing in our dining room, but also the syntax through which it gets said. A red flag of trouble in any communication among people in leadership positions is the existence of qualifiers. In linguistics, these are called modality and mood. "Could, Should, May, and Might" are not words spoken or written much by determined, committed persons. Similarly, Philosopher J.L. Austin presented the concept of Illocutionary Acts in 1975. Basically, an Illocutionary Act has three parts: what was literally said, what was meant by what was said, and what happens as a result of what was said. Recognizing the accuracy of an Illocutionary Act is helpful in assessing the purposive intentions of our leaders. In other words, "We need this to happen" may not be synonymous with "We're dedicating our own measurable resources to make sure this happens, and we'll reward you for your participation."

We like an enduring comparison by Fogg (1999), which postulates an analogy using Newton's First and Second Laws (Newton's Laws are well known enough that we can paraphrase them for the purpose of a management metaphor). Specifically, a group of people at rest will remain inactive while a group of people in motion will continue doing what they've always done; and the sum of forces acting on a group of people will dictate how the group responds to those forces. Among the things we like about this model is that Fogg's framework requires a realistic identification of the forces and pressures that will either facilitate or hinder attempts to use higher education to improve humanity. Momentum (speed and impetus), and inertia (retention of place or direction) are relevant among leaders as much as among physical labors.

Business and Technology:

My colleagues and I also share a concern that large improvements in higher education seem to be heavily based in virtual reality. Technology is our friend during these phases, but our review of literature causes us to believe management should see technology as a tool and not a solution. Real improvements are just that—real. Perhaps it's our career fields influencing us, but we agree that improvements won't last unless we change the actual behaviors of real people involved, and the more locally those changes take place, the better. Based upon not only this brief review of literature but also upon our real-world experience, my colleagues and I agree on one thing: while strategy lands upon management, it is individual workers who implement it. Motivated, enthusiastic, informed employees facilitate successful implementation, while reluctant or obstinate employees hinder, or even kill it (Cadwallader, et al., 2010; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Mitchell, Coles, & Metz, 1999; Thompson & Strickland, 1995).

On top of it all, Artificial Intelligence is changing everything about management, including the notion of relying on people to improve humanity. "While OpenAI's goal is to develop artificial general intelligence (AGI), the company says it is dedicated to ensuring the technology is developed in a way that 'benefits all of humanity.'" (Kahn, 2020, 63).   "When consultancy Pegasystems recently asked Americans whether they believed they had interacted with A.I, only one in three said yes; in fact, almost 85% had done so." (Heimer, 2018, 91). A *nota bene* piece of irony for us during our lunchroom conversations is that Artificial Intelligence seems so cutting-edge and new, yet the phrase was coined in 1956 (Lee, 2018), making A.I. the oldest thing we've referenced in this entire article. Tally into the mix a current-day cultural shift in "truth" from collective agreements to individual preferences, and the AGI waters go from muddy to downright nebulous.

In addition to artificial intelligence, the field of economics, for instance, provides the Law of Returns to Scale, which can be useful in clarifying how much any given input leads to better practices and when it has reached a phase of decreasing returns and should be disinvested. Applying Law of Returns to Scale to technology, the three phases regarding purposive improvements of humanity are increasing returns, plateaued returns, and diminishing returns (Ponnusamy, 2017). Assuming that inputs and outputs are measurable, like investments of time and money compared to product completion and customer satisfaction ratings, the correlation between Law of Returns to Scale and quality of life can be a powerful guide for higher education governance.

Our colleagues in business and management also provide the metaphor that multi-helix models are using broad scopes of cross-disciplinary values to create ecosystems of purpose-driven decisions (Adamides & Voutsina, 2006; InnoCentive, 2018; Kimatu, 2016). We like both the trend and the technology, but based on our real-world scars from the past, we admonish this caution: don't overlook the simple power of what people want. That influence will never, never, never change (please recall Drucker's quote from earlier in this article about culture eating strategy).

Summaries:

If AGI is going to do a lot of thinking for humans, and collective attention spans are shrinking into nanoseconds, and we don't even agree about what's accurate or right any more, then it would seem that purposive improvements are being limited to what people can see and do right now, so a strategy isn't even necessary. We disagree, based on the premise that if we humans choose to limit our ventures to places we can see from where we're standing and things we already know, then we're not implementing improvements at all; however, if we want to journey to the furthest points of our capabilities, then we absolutely do need a purposive approach to human quality. My colleagues and I believe these are days when people need planning, dialogue, and implementation more than any other period in recent history.

Suspicious as we appear to be, we like the future of open-innovation initiatives in higher education because they're a modern-day equivalent to the contrasting schools of thought mentioned in the opening pages of this article. They view complexities as lessons and opportunities, not difficulties to be controlled, and it is only through this kind of learning and communicating that humanity can genuinely improve.

Conclusions:

We agree that improving humanity is the overarching goal of higher education and that the barriers of purposive leadership are timeless, yet there are new technologies, measurements, and schools of thought that provide roadmaps to chart our journey and provide benchmarks to assess our successes. Mostly, we agree that genuine success is achieved among concerned people who use strategic planning, do actual work, and collaborate toward a firm destination using flexible methodologies.

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