Distributed Leadership: what does it accomplish?

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Abstract

The term 'distributed leadership' has been prominent in research into educational management for some time. A number of articles have recently questioned the explanatory utility of the concept; in this essay we examine its rhetorical function in higher education institutions. We suggest that it has served to contain and to some extent ameliorate two contradictions in the experience of academics who take on managerial roles or who exert leadership of some sort. Firstly, it may help to make sense of a contrast between their experience of leadership and their sense of what it should be; secondly, it helps to mediate conflicts in the identity-work of being an academic and a manager. Also, placed in the wider context of changes in the cultures of universities, 'distributed leadership' may mask the concentration of influence with those who have control of budgets, threats to traditional means of upward communication, and the predominance of academic leadership. We conclude that the term 'distributed leadership' draws attention to the large number of actors involved in leadership, and the importance of organizational processes in shaping their engagements, but has limited use as an analytical heuristic. However it has a number of rhetorical functions that make a significant contribution to the ways in which leadership is accomplished in sectors such as Higher Education.

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Recent research into education (at all levels) has highlighted the ways in which leadership is constructed from the widespread distribution of agency throughout complex organisations and the extent to which a leaders' influence is inexorably bound to the contribution of others, so that leadership may be said to be "stretched over the social and situational contexts" (Spillane et al., 2004: 5). However, this need not imply that 'distributed leadership' is an alternative to more traditional forms of leadership. Rather, as Collinson and Collinson (2006; and this issue) and Gronn (2008) have argued, in further education (FE) and schools respectively, effective leadership generally involves a 'blended' or 'hybrid' mix of approaches. Distributed leadership is not a replacement for individual leadership, rather it is an essential complement that both facilitates and is facilitated by the leadership of specific individuals.

Much of the debate about distributed leadership as an aspirational and 'post-heroic' approach through which more equitable and inclusive working practices may be achieved can be somewhat misleading. Such a perspective idealises the notion and glosses over both what people actually do when 'leading', as well as the significant rhetorical value of labelling leadership as 'distributed' whether or not it actually is. In our own research in universities, for example, we noticed that alongside the discourse of 'distributed leadership' was a steady transition from collegial to more managerial models of administration and the erosion of traditional channels for upwards influence such as the committee system and collective bargaining through the unions (Bolden at al, 2008a; 2008b; 2009). To appreciate the function of a distributed perspective on leadership requires recognition of the social, political and power relations within organisations. These in turn evolve in response to changes in the policy, social, cultural and economic context, nationally and globally; the effects within higher education institutions (HEIs) are by no means uniform, and many of the ways in which institutions seek to gain purchase on their wider context appear contradictory. Figure 1 offers a very attenuated summary of these pressures and responses, showing, for example, that pressure for entrepreneurial, customer-responsive behaviour may imply greater devolution of decision-making; but that this comes at the same time as drives to consolidate small (locally sensitive) departments into larger units capable of leveraging more substantial funding and economies of scale.

[Figure 1 – About here]

There is therefore no single or unidirectional line of development for HEIs; and no straightforward way to lead and manage them. Rather, there is very properly a constant experimentation; and, because leadership is all to do with power and authority, the meaning and purposes of this experimentation is itself a matter of interpretation and context. There is of course a further complication: that most researchers into the phenomenon of leadership (however it is distributed or configured (Gronn, this issue)) are themselves members of universities, with vested interests both in the exercise of authority and the rhetoric by which this is justified and contested (Bryman and Lilley, this issue).

Within this context of uncertainty and contestation it seems appropriate to reflect a while on what function(s) the notion of 'distributed leadership' might accomplish for people studying, developing and practicing leadership. Four possible options are outlined below:

a) Descriptive – 'distributed leadership' may provide a more accurate or complete description of the ways in which influence is exerted by people throughout an organisation or community than more traditional, individually-focussed accounts (Gronn, 2002). This description, if accurate, has prescriptive implications. Authors such as Leithwood et al (2006), for example, argue that leadership in schools is more effective (in terms of student learning outcomes) if distributed widely, and Klein et al (2006) argue a similar case for 'deindividualized' shared leadership in emergency medical teams.

b) Corrective – following from the point above, the focus of leadership studies (and leadership development) was for too long almost exclusively on the personality and behaviours of individuals, as if the term 'followers' adequately described the quality of engagement of everyone else involved in an initiative or organisation. Authors such as Day (2000) and Iles and Preece (2006) propose that in addition to developing the 'human capital' of 'leaders' we should also endeavour to build the 'social capital' of organisations through engaging people at all levels and building and strengthening collective capacity.

c) Empowering – recognising the qualities of leadership that are practised throughout an organisation, 'distributed leadership' may encourage mutual support in excising these qualities, whether in the role of classroom lecturer, departmental head or principal. By espousing a view whereby everyone has a part to play in leadership the accountability for and ownership of organisational objectives becomes part of everyone's role, not just the responsibility of the formal 'leader'.

d) Rhetorical – as part of the vocabulary employed to make sense of authority relations, 'distributed leadership' is an idea that can be mobilised to contest or justify changes in the way power is exercised in much the same way as the notion of 'leadership', more generally, has been used to challenge overly mechanistic approaches to management (e.g. Zaleznik, 1977; Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

The first two of these functions contribute mainly to the descriptive and analytical tasks of leadership researchers and developers by addressing how to better understand the ways in which leadership is configured. The latter two are more directly prescriptive and relate to the concerns of leadership practitioners, though in contrasting senses. The empowering effects of distributed leadership may arise if leadership development strategies are guided by the concept of distributed leadership so that members of an organisation recognise their own part in empowering their leaders to represent them; and also if they feel encouraged to take on initiatives of their own. This could have far reaching effects, because initiatives taken by research teams in HE, for example, can turn out to have significant impact on institutional strategies, especially where these relate to emerging opportunities for investment. Likewise these kinds of opportunities could easily be closed down if all such initiatives are expected to come from the central bureaucracy. However this is nothing new: it is simply a current vocabulary for expressing the tension between centralisation and local autonomy.

But there may be other changes in HE to which 'distributed leadership' refers more obliquely; Whitchurch (2008), for example, refers to the growing importance of project managers taking care of building schemes, internationalisation, partnerships, marketing and so on that bridge and shape both academic and administrative functions. It may well be that real influence is indeed now distributed amongst a more heterogeneous population of employees, less dominated by academics, although given the long standing division between these functions, with organisational support systems under the control of the registrar's staff, one may question the extent to which this is

actually a new development or simply a long awaited recognition of the vital role played by staff who are not part of the formal academic faculty. But why should this influence stop at the boundaries of the institution? There are three obvious directions in which leadership might become more widely 'distributed'. First, an organised body of ex-students could have a significant impact on reputation and finances by influencing student surveys – a key metric in most funding regimes. And by 'organised' we now include the emergent opinion-dominated organising typified by blogs, face-book, twitter and other cyberspace fora, which may become loci for knowledge creation more generally, in which universities will have to respond as participants rather than arbiters. Secondly, if industrial partners for research are really persuaded to come up with the money, they will also devise ways of influencing longer term institutional investments; and where these may have regional economic impact, local authorities will be more active partners. Management of institutional developments will be increasingly influenced by such multi-party alliances, further distributing the effective leadership of HE activities. Thirdly, the boundaries between FE, HE and other forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) may become much more indistinct, so that HE institutions have to take into account the practices of these other agencies. This comes alongside growing internationalisation which forces more complex operating alliances in student recruitment, facilities management, delivery of teaching, student services, financial engineering, and so forth. While some of these relationships will be managed via bi-lateral arrangements, many will become much more complex, with the locus of influence and control often some way beyond the traditional boundaries of a single institution. The federal structures of the more ancient universities – with their constant tensions around subsidiarity – may provide a model, but we are probably heading towards a far greater degree diversity of interests and motivations across the sector, guided by consortia and partnerships rather than individual institutions. Furthermore, the need to manage in this context of distributed influence will affect mid-level managers (heads of schools and departments) and research leaders almost as much as institutional heads. They will have to develop and sustain domain-specific links with partners (both within and outside their organisation and sector) for research, course delivery and staff development, requiring both considerable personal investment and the support services able to handle many contingent and often conflicting demands.

So if the factors and actors influencing the progress of higher education are becoming more diverse and distributed, does this mean that leadership will become dissipated and dispersed? Far from it. The evidence of recent research in the FE and HE sectors is that prominent, respected individual leaders in the most senior positions are a crucial ingredient (Collinson & Collinson this issue; Gronn, this issue; Middlehurst et al., this issue; Bolden et al, 2008a). However it would seem that the distribution of leadership (as influence) has a long way still to go, taking it beyond the bounds of individual institutions. Research into such boundary spanning leadership will be crucial.

However, 'distributed leadership' operates as more than a descriptor of the political geography of power and influence. It is a phrase that has become almost commonplace: in 152 interviews with HE managers across the UK in 2006 and 2007, very few questioned the term or asked for further clarification (Bolden et al, 2008a). It is not really obvious what it refers to, and yet everyone seems to know what it means: clearly its interpretation therefore has as much to do with meaning-making as merely a description of a commonly perceived phenomenon. In other words, 'distributed leadership' is an effective term within HE because it resonates both with the experiences and expectations of university staff. It embraces notions of collegiality and autonomy whilst addressing the need for

management. As such, it performs a rhetorical function that may well outstrip its ability to hold up under scrutiny as a true descriptor of leadership practice within the sector.

One such rhetorical function may be to valorise the experience of mid-level academics who find themselves facing more demands to take initiative and responsibility and a frequent sense of tension between their identities as academics and managers. As evidence for this, we draw on the research mentioned above, and reported in detail in Bolden et al 2008a (see also 2008b; 2009). All the interviewees thought the term 'distributed leadership' referred to important aspects of their experience, and the majority also felt it had normative significance as something to be aspired to or even prescribed[1]. Analysis of their responses revealed variations in what they thought they were referring to, specifically to how they conceived the context, task, structures and personalities of significant individuals. These variations match quite closely those identified by MacBeath et al. (2004) in schools, as follows:

- Formal distribution: e.g devolution of budgets to school or departmental level.

- Pragmatic distribution: e.g. negotiated division of responsibilities for internal and external facing tasks.

- Strategic distribution: e.g. appointing external 'partners' to run some aspects of student recruitment.

- Incremental distribution: e.g. opportunities to progressively take on more responsibility via committees and special projects (this is a key way in which professional service staff are gaining more influence in universities).

- Opportunistic distribution: e.g. individuals taking on influential roles both within and beyond their employing university.

- Cultural distribution: e.g. shared perceptions that leadership is exercised by a group acting in concert, or is allocated on a consensual and task-specific basis.

These categories express the many ways in which people conceive of distributed leadership; and attest to a general awareness that leadership is exercised in a number of ways. There was no evidence of an underlying 'ideal type' towards which all modes of distribution tend, nor that one leads to another (for example, experiences of 'opportunistically' distributed leadership do not necessarily inculcate a 'culture' of distribution). When asked for examples of practical ways in which leadership is distributed, interviewees most frequently cited organizational systems and processes by which decision-making is devolved or delegated. The control of resources (particularly financial) was seen as a decisive feature in the distribution of leadership, with those devoid of budgetary control (or direct influence over those who control the finances) somewhat disempowered and frequently bypassed in decision-making. So although some authors urge a distinction between 'distributed leadership' and devolved or delegated authority (Knight and Trowler, 2001; Lumby, 2003; Harris, 2003), it appears that control of the financial resources is crucial to the experience of exercising leadership in mid-level roles in HEIs. More specifically, it is control of spending reserves, rather than simple accountability for pre-determined budgets, that makes a difference and also leads to an uneven distribution of power and capacity to influence.

Research is an area in which one might expect to find the intellectual authority of scholars expressed in their leadership of projects and initiatives with a wider institutional scope and this does, indeed,

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[1] This is not always our experience when presenting these ideas to people outside the HE sector. On our CPD courses with mid-level staff in the military, for example, we frequently find resistance to this concept and a scepticism that it offers useful insights into how to lead and manage organisations.

seem to be a realm in which academics willingly take the lead, coordinate activities across professional disciplines and assume responsibility for budgets. Here their professional identity as an academic (as a member of a peer group allied to a specific discipline) is more or less in concert with that of a manager (as a member of a peer group engaged in organisational processes and tasks). The latter identity may well be assumed or accepted as a means to enhance the former. But at the next level up, as head of department or school, interviewees report a more evident tension between their roles as academics and as managers – and thus between their 'leadership' in relation to each[2]. This might be conceptualised as a conflict of 'social identities' (Haslam, 2004): one that is particularly hard to resolve in practical terms, because both the reality of intellectual autonomy *and* that of financial constraints must be recognised. It might also explain the popularity, alluded to in our sample (yet interestingly absent in Bryman and Lilley's (this issue) accounts from leadership researchers), of 'charismatic' and 'visionary' leaders who represent ideals and purposes that transcend pragmatic contradictions. Such leaders give voice to the unitary aspect of the institutional enterprise, while formal organisational processes manage the multiplicity of interests (and sometimes the outright conflicts) (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Insofar as becoming a leader in HE is an identity-project in itself (Parker, 2004; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), it seems to be associated with identification as a representative of unitary, even transcendent purpose. It is interesting to speculate on both why and how this comes about. One reason 'why' is to provide a shared social identity; in Reicher et al's evocative phrase, "leaders are entrepreneurs of identity" (2007:29). The unitary effect of the leader is accomplished by virtue of the fact that he or she represents features that are 'prototypical' of the community, and thereby defend organisational members against the anxiety that their individuality and autonomy might turn out to be devastatingly lonely. In this account, 'followers' would be more accurately referred to as 'participants' in this collective identity-affirming project. There are also likely to be more mundane reasons: whoever is in charge has to deal with a lot of distracting responsibilities, so others may very sensibly decide that life is better as a so-called 'follower'.

As we have seen, this poses particular problems in practice, where tensions between individual autonomy and organisational coherence are compounded by tensions between professional academic and managerial identities. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is often a striking contrast between descriptions of what leadership should be like, in principle, and how it is experienced. When asked to list the advantages and disadvantages of distributed leadership, interviewees cited benefits such as: Improved responsiveness to students, staff and research agencies; transparency of finances and therefore clearer incentives for innovation and entrepreneurship; sharing of managerial tasks; and better communication amongst academic and professional services staff. But they also referred to the growth of 'silo mentality', role confusion, delayed decisions, and unrealistic expectations and stress on some staff. These lists are revealing in one respect: they are managerially oriented, perhaps reflecting our sample, but also clearly locating the value judgments (of benefits and costs) from the position of 'managing the institution'.. Eliciting accounts of how the distribution of leadership has been experienced from the perspective of 'organisational members', however, afforded more nuanced and varied accounts, summarised in the following table:

[Table 1 – About here]

This appears to be a rather thorough dissing[3] of leadership, particularly as exercised and experienced by mid-level academic managers. The contrast between this and the former 'in principle' list of benefits and costs, is striking and points once more to the rhetorical function of the term

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[2] Within our own study this was most strongly expressed in relation to the tension experienced by academic leaders during a period of industrial action, where several faced a significant conflict of interests.

[3] *Diss:* (US, UK, slang) to put (someone) down, or show disrespect by the use of insulting language or dismissive behaviour. Wiktionary, 16/03/09

'distributed leadership'. It is common in research into management and leadership to find a contrast between what is people believe the roles *should* involve and how they are *actually* experienced (see Bolden and Gosling, 2008, for an analysis of this in other sectors). One meaning-making function of talk about leadership is to give expression to this experience of mismatch, and to offer – implicitly- a resolution. By bundling together the unitive imagery associated with 'leader' and the pluralism associated with 'distributed', two significant resolutions are achieved: firstly, political struggles around autonomy and control; secondly, identity-work dilemmas around academic and managerial purposes.

In other words, we have identified two dialectics at work in the professional lives of HE managers: one to do with the constantly contested exercise of authority; the other to do with the emergent and reflexive identity work that is intrinsic to taking on a managerial role (Rice, 1969; Collinson and Collinson, this issue). By implicitly acknowledging these tensions, distributed leadership assumes a kind of face validity. It appears to recognise these important aspects of reality; it literally 'makes sense'. Yet as we have seen, because it is so immediately plausible as a phrase, it may also distract from some of the underlying difficulties – the *realpolitik* by which power goes to those who control the budgets; the threats to established structures for consultation and collective action; the general failure of leadership to operate as one might wish, indicated by the 'dissing' in Table 1.

More positively, the inherent ambiguity in the term (leadership is distributed from above, like blessings from heaven; or leadership emerges from distributed sources, like a river from its tributaries) provides a discursive context for these competing perspectives. People using this phrase may have quite different notions of what it describes, and very different ideas about what it prescribes but at least they feel able to engage in conversation with one another.

Our argument thus far is summarised in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 – about here]

Let us now return to the functions we hypothesized for 'distributed leadership' at the start of this essay:

a) Descriptive – We have found limited evidence that it accurately describes the reality of leadership in HE, except in so far as it evokes a vaguely but generally felt aspiration for the way leadership is or should be. Whilst it usefully draws attention to the broader range of actors involved in leadership it does little to illuminate the significance of 'person-plus' (Spillane et al., 2004) aspects of leadership. Like the individually-focussed theories that preceded it, 'distributed leadership' remains only a partial lens on leadership (see Gronn, this issue, for a discussion of how to expand the focus).

b) Corrective – As an analytical framework, it serves well to draw attention to the variety of constituents of leadership, and to the iterative relations between tasks, actors, roles and organisational context, all of which are constitutive of leadership as it is practised and experienced (Grint, 2000). It also encourages us to examine how power relations evolve over time, different structural arrangements, and influencing factors beyond organizational boundaries. But in truth this analytical purpose could be more directly addressed by dropping the reified concept of 'distributed leadership' and asking a straightforward question: 'how is power distributed?'

c) Empowering – This, we have found, is largely a function of the next category and is dependent on the extent to which narratives of 'distributed leadership' are able to enhance a person's sense of agency and their motivation to get involved in the work of leadership. There is some evidence that talk about distributed leadership has been instrumental in

directing leadership development, coaching and mentoring resources towards more junior staff than hitherto (Petrov et al., 2007).

d) Rhetorical – as part of the vocabulary employed to make sense of authority relations, 'distributed leadership' speaks to the dialectics inherent in both centre- periphery power relations and in the identity-work involved in taking up managerial roles. It may help people to articulate their desires and disappointments about leadership, but may also distract from the systemic degradation of academic autonomy and creeping managerialism.

In conclusion, therefore, we argue that the ways in which we talk about leadership are both constructed by and help to construct our understandings and enactment of leadership. As Spillane et al. (2004: 20-21) propose that "situation or context does not simply 'affect' what school leaders do as some sort of independent or inter-dependent variable(s); it is *constitutive* of leadership practice" (initial emphasis), we argue that rhetoric is a further constitutive factor. In closing, we should note that this essay, and the Special Issue of Leadership in which it appears, is itself part of the contested rhetorical field – as Bryman and Lilley (this issue) point out in the conclusions to their paper. Leadership Studies is a curiously reflexive pursuit in the academy yet, given the importance afforded to reflection and critique by members of the academic community and the centrality of these capabilities to ethical and effective leadership (Ciulla, 1997; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004), we believe that it is in this reflexivity that we might find the best hope for well lead universities.

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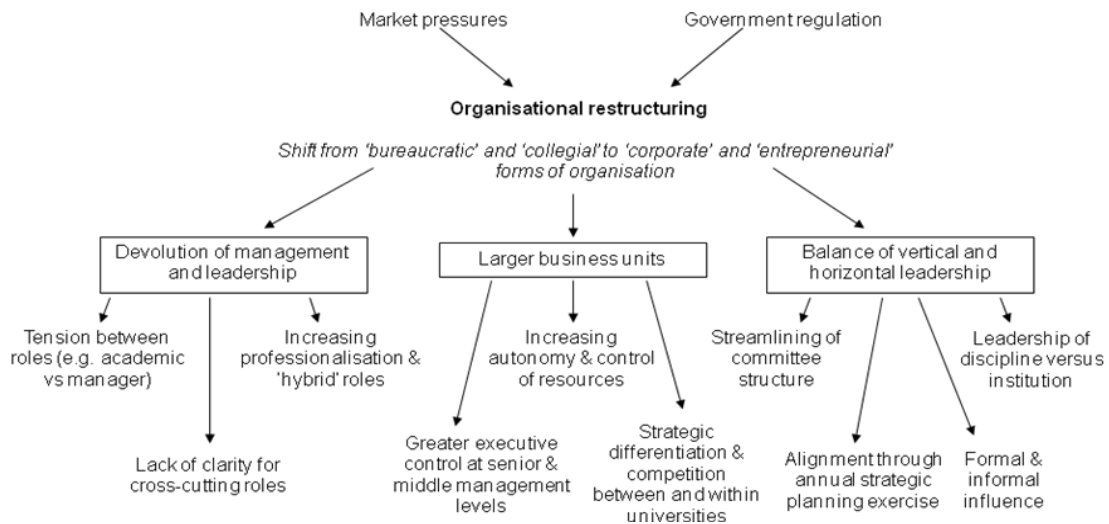
Figure 1 – Leadership strategies and approaches in HE (from Bolden et al., 2008a: 26)
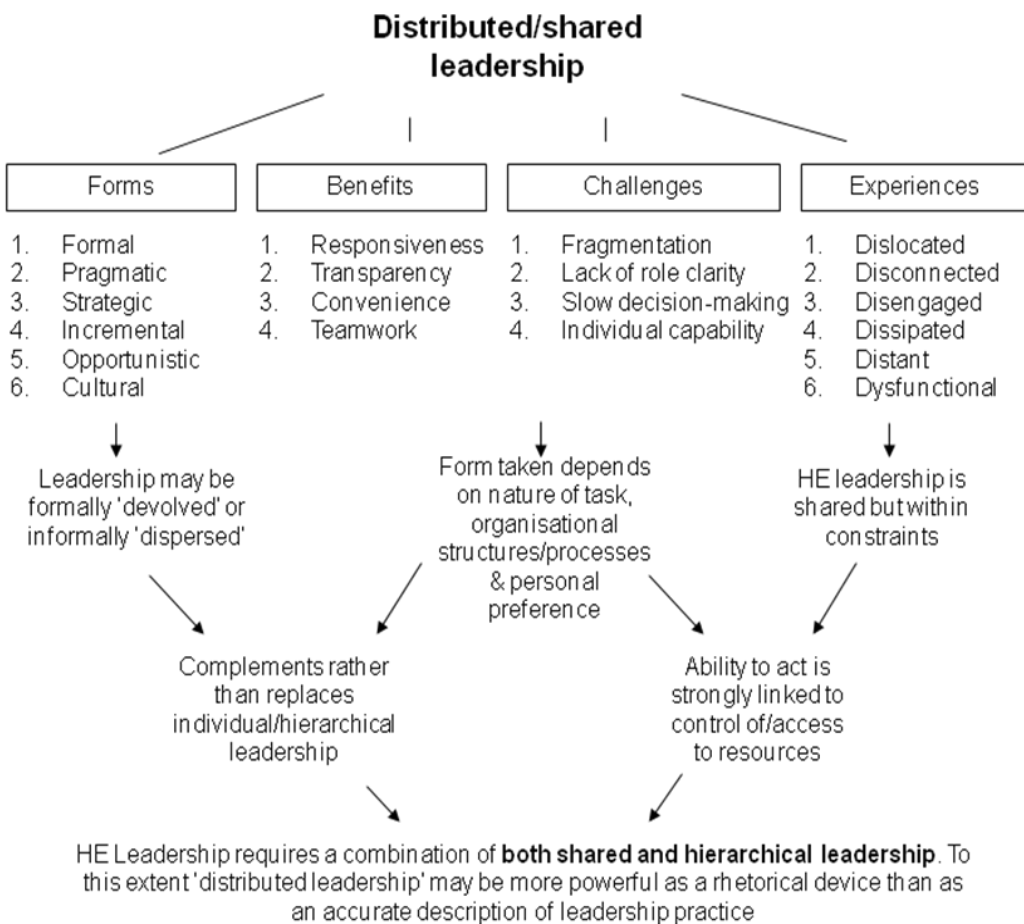

Figure 2 – The distribution of leadership in HE (from Bolden et al., 2008a: 45)

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Form	Description	Example
Dislocated	Top-down and bottom-up systems don't match up; leadership doesn't occur where it is needed.	Weakened central leadership where budgets are devolved to schools or faculties that make it difficult to initiate and sustain institution-wide initiatives such as corporate branding and IT.
Disconnected	Different parts of the institution pulling in different directions; lack of consistent/coherent direction/vision; competing agendas.	Formation of a 'silo mentality' within schools, with holders of devolved budgets pursuing their own objectives, not aligned with (or even counter to) the overall university mission and objectives.
Disengaged	Staff avoid becoming involved in leadership and management of the institution; leadership is seen as unappealing, unrewarding or unnecessary.	Leadership viewed as administration/bureaucracy rather than strategic and inter-personal – e.g. leadership and management of school/university versus academic leadership of research or discipline.
Dissipated	Leadership is too broadly diffused across groups with little accountability or responsibility for implementing decisions and actions.	This was a frequent criticism of the committee structure, described as a 'washing machine' where decisions go round and round remaining unresolved and disowned.
Distant	Leadership is felt to be removed from the operational level of the organisation; inaccessible, imposed; not necessarily 'in our best interests'.	Decisions taken at senior management level and imposed with limited consultation. This situation seems to be amplified where senior managers are physically distant from academic departments.
Dysfunctional	Leadership fails to achieve its intentions; results in unexpected/undesirable outcomes; misalignment of performance measures.	Negative reaction to performance review and appraisal process by senior academic staff; performance measures driving individual rather than team behaviour; risk aversion and dysfunctional systems arising from failures of senior leadership.

Table 1 - Alternative accounts of leadership in HE (from Bolden at al. 2009: 268)