Leadership: The linchpin of effective institutional partnerships

Glenn Hanna
University of Guelph-Humber, Canada

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Abstract

The Ontario post-secondary environment is divided between colleges and universities, each with differing mandates. While there is cooperation, this divide has led to competition and conflict between the sectors. The University of Guelph-Humber is a partnership between a college and a university offering an integrated curriculum leading to both a college diploma and a university degree. This qualitative intrinsic case study was designed to provide insight into the nature, evolution, benefits, and challenges of the partnership. This paper focuses on what the participants described as the most important aspect of the sustainability of the partnership – leadership. Thirty-three participants were interviewed, documents reviewed, and field observations conducted.

The resulting data was interpreted through the lens of Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 2014). The interpretation of the data showed that senior leadership commitments to the partnership – clearly communicated – were crucial to sustaining the partnership. Leadership as described in some cases was transformational, but in others as transactional. In situations of transactional leadership, the goal interdependence (Deutsch, 2014) for followers was directed at career aspirations rather than directed at overarching organizational goals. Whether employees buy into the goals of the leaders (transformational leadership), or they adopt those goals due to the perception of interdependence between their own career goal and the goals of the leader (transactional leadership), the fact remains that the goals of the leader – clearly communicated – influenced those within the organization. The weakness observed with more transactional leadership was the lack of motivation to move organizational goals forward during periods of leadership change or absence. Leadership was the linchpin of the partnership that has sustained an "impressive an example of cooperation between postsecondary sectors as exists anywhere in the world" (Skolnik, 2005, para. 29). While a linchpin is critical to holding a complex system together, and hence a positive influence on organizations, it is also a great vulnerability when in its absence, the system is left unsupported.

Introduction

The Canadian province of Ontario has two separate post-secondary sectors: universities and colleges. Colleges are the more recent sector (established in 1965), mandated with providing local community level access to vocationally oriented post-secondary education. Universities were intended to occupy the more traditional role as the generators of knowledge and truth (Hogan & Trotter, 2013; Oakeshott, 2003). Differing mandates and philosophical approaches, along with increasingly similar client pools and increasingly convergent mandates and operations, have created a divide between the sectors. While there can be cooperation, the divide is often characterized by competition, and even conflict (Skolnik, 2011).

One unique example of inter-sector cooperation appears to have bridged this divide: the Toronto based University of Guelph-Humber. Operated as a separate and distinct institution, the University of Guelph-Humber is a cooperative partnership between the University of Guelph and Humber College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning (Humber College). The University of Guelph-Humber partnership has merged both university and college requirements into one integrated curriculum, resulting in the potential attainment of a

University of Guelph undergraduate honours degree and a Humber College diploma within four years of university level education (Hook & Grant, 2008; University of Guelph-Humber, 2014).

While it exists physically, operating from its own building, the University of Guelph-Humber does not technically exist in a legal sense. It cannot confer its own credentials, enter into contracts, nor hire its own staff or faculty members. All staff and faculty are employed by one of the two partner agencies (University of Guelph & Humber College, 2004). There are areas of decision making that can be made, but only under the delegated authorities of the partners (Hanna, 2016). The University of Guelph-Humber is solely a joint venture between Humber College and the University of Guelph, and is therefore dependent on the continuing cooperation of the partners for its existence.

The partnership has expanded from 200 students in 2002, to almost 5000 students by 2015 (University of Guelph-Humber, n.d.) with graduates showing success in the workplace and in graduate studies (Hanna, 2016; Hook & Grant, 2008). In addition to its student success, the University of Guelph-Humber partnership generates a significant profit for the partner institutions in an era when funding for post-secondary institutions is a sought after commodity. In the 2014–2015 fiscal year approximately 17 million dollars (Canadian) in net income was returned to the partners (University of Guelph, 2014) and this is projected to be significantly higher for 2015-2016 (Hanna, 2016). With a commonality of institutional goals— student success and enhanced institutional reputations (Hanna, 2016)—the partnership has been described as "impressive an example of cooperation between postsecondary sectors as exists anywhere in the world" (Skolnik, 2005, para. 29). This inter-institutional partnership appears to have successfully created a bridge that has been sustained for over 13 years across the divide in Ontario's post-secondary environment. Participants in this study described the communicated commitment of the leaders as crucial to the sustainability of the partnership.

Purpose of Study

From a social constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Johnson & Johnson, 2005; Pouliot, 2007; Roth & Lee, 2007) and using the theoretical lens of the social interdependence approach to cooperation, competition, and conflict posited by Deutsch (2014), this research examined the inter-institutional relationships between Humber College, the University of Guelph, and the University of Guelph-Humber.

The purpose of the study was to determine how this unique partnership model has remained sustainable in the face of the divide displayed in Ontario's post-secondary environment. The research provided insights into the effects of leadership, the integration of operations and curriculum, successful student outcomes, increased institutional reputations, organizational change pressures, and institutional identity. This paper will concentrate on what participants described as the crucial role leadership played in sustaining the partnership, and the challenges seen in how this crucial role operated.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

This research was undertaken though the paradigm of social constructivism. The epistemological basis of constructivism is that knowledge is constructed from experience rather than part of an objective truth (Campbell, 2009; Glasersfeld, 1995; Rorty, 1979; Tsou, 2006). Refuting the concept of absolute truth, a constructivist paradigm posits instead that truth is a construct: "defined . . . simply as the most informed and sophisticated construction on which there is consensus among individuals most competent (not necessarily most powerful) to form such a construction" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 86).

Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 2014; Johnson & Johnson, 2005) examines the orientation of, and dynamics between, individuals in competitive groups, and how that can lead to either conflict or to cooperation. This is a social constructivist theoretical approach and is used in this study to provide insights into how competition, conflict, and cooperation, which are inherent in the Ontario post-secondary environment, are handled in the case under study—the University of Guelph-Humber.

Social Interdependence Theory examines the individual and group dynamics in a range of areas. Individuals tend to have a cooperative or a competitive orientation; the goals of institutions can be tied to how each group meets, or fails to meet, its needs, (goal interdependence) leading to positive or negative relationships (Deutsch, 2014). These orientations can lead the individual, and groups, into competition, cooperation, or even conflict (Deutsch, 2014).

Overview of Methodology

This research examined the socially constructed partnership at the University of Guelph-Humber, using a qualitative intrinsic case study methodological approach involving interviews, document examination, and observations (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The methodology and methods, drawn from a social constructivist paradigm, were designed to provide an inductive interpretation of the case from the perspective of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Pouliot, 2007).

Interviews were conducted with 33 participants from all involved institutions and levels of employment. This included part time and full time faculty members, administrators, and executives. Students were not involved as participants due to the lack of involvement by students in inter-institutional partnership activities. In this paper, participants are identified by a unique number, as well as the location of their employment and their employment category.

Data interpretation was conducted through the lens of Social Interdependence Theory as described by Deutsch (2014). In the spirit of constructivism, the interpretation was intended to look for an interpretive "crystallization of understanding" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963) which, is more accepting of difference in the constructs presented, as opposed to triangulations, which it can be argued, are looking for precision in analyses (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Role of Researcher

Due to my connections to the University of Guelph-Humber, I was an "insider" during the conduct of this research. I am a graduate of the University of Guelph-Humber, with a University of Guelph undergraduate degree and a Humber College diploma. In 2010, I began employment at the University of Guelph-Humber, hired through Humber College. At the time this study was conducted, I was employed as the Assistant Program Head, Justice Studies.

This situation provided an emic (insider) perspective. This is a perspective that is aligned with a constructivist approach, as both seek a contextual understanding from the perspective of those involved in the case under study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999).

Leadership Finding

When asked what had sustained the University of Guelph-Humber partnership, the area most commented on by participant was leadership. Participants described the role that leadership played in encouraging and motivating others to support the partnership. They also described how the absence of leadership, either through indifference, or during leadership

transitions (at Humber College between 2012 and 2015, and at the University of Guelph between 2014 and 2016), resulted in a perceived lack of support.

From the initial discussions about the possible creation of a partnership between Humber College and the University of Guelph, to the time of this research–13 years later– participants described leadership as playing a crucial role in the sustainability of the partnership. Leadership was described as having "profound impacts on how we operate and how we feel" (P9, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration). This "profound impact" is described in this paper as the linchpin of the partnership. A linchpin is "a person or thing that holds something together: the most important part of a complex situation or system" (Linchpin, 2016). This definition is consistent with the view of participants that leadership commitments to the partnership were critical to its success, and that without that commitment the complex partnership that is the University of Guelph-Humber was at risk.

Participants who had been present at the formation of the University of Guelph-Humber gave credit for the successful creation and launch of the new institution to the leadership of the founding presidents.

> Leadership. It was leadership. The whole thing has rested on leadership. The magic parts are really the leadership that started it first of all. So [the founding presidents] were committed to doing something. I have no idea how that conversation took place, whether it was only apocryphal over a bottle of Scotch or what. But whatever it was, they clicked and the idea emerged from them. And it was passed on to the folks below. People took hold of the idea and you knew when you were in there that this was not an effort that was going to just fall by the way side. (P28, University of Guelph, Administration)

Participants from all roles and institutions recognized that senior leadership example was needed to encourage others to support what was seen at the time as a very unusual endeavour:

> So the two presidents created opportunities for the two of them to speak together and symbolically and verbally made it clear that they were a united front. This partnership was important to them, and the fact that that was the case, allowed for many of us to buy in. The fact that they had this vision, and they told us about this vision, and what it could be and many of us were kind of like, "Arrrrr!" It was something that was so revolutionary and we weren't sure if it was going to work. But our presidents were very clear and steadfast right from the beginning that this was where we are going. (P5, Humber College, Administration)

The communication of expectations did not just provide guidance to others, but provided the cultural and organizational support that others may have needed in order to move forward.

> The two [presidents] hit it off socially, actually with a common interest in Basketball. Following that meeting of the minds between the presidents, there were a series of meetings that took place at Guelph and Humber where [the University of Guelph president] required the Deans and Associate Deans to meet each other from each institution and hammer out areas where there was common bench strength . . . and begin to formulate plans for senate approval at the University of Guelph and academic approvals at Humber . . . He was a strong president and made it clear that was his expectation. And [the Humber College president] had served 20 years as president at Humber and was extremely charismatic. (P21, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration)

When the University of Guelph-Humber was created, it was not all cooperation. There were demonstrations of competition as described by participants. But eventually the relationships became more cooperative as it became clear that there was goal interdependence (Deutsch, 2014) within the partnership. A prime example of this was described in the following quotation:

> [The Humber VP] said, after hearing discussions about degrees, and the degree process, and what is required to put it through senate and governance processes, as opposed to the processes used at a community college, just said one day, 'It doesn't make sense for us to [have this process conducted from Humber College], it makes sense to have it at Guelph.' And there were other things, and we would say, 'It doesn't make sense to present or provide [this] from Guelph, it makes sense to provide them from Humber.' So then this sort of logjam broke. So what makes sense in terms of doing what? And a lot of the caution slipped away. People got on with sorting out how we were going to do what . . . It was pervasive. (P28, University of Guelph, Administration)

This is a demonstration of several attributes described in and predicted by the Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 2014): positive goal interdependence, individuals with a cooperative orientation, effective action, and a positive outcome. It is clear from this participant's recollection that once the pattern was set in motion, other decisions followed this pattern. Participants' comments from these early time period described leadership that can be seen as transformational—leaders encouraged others to adopt common goals and to be cooperative in doing so.

It was not just the presidents who displayed a needed level of leadership at a formative time. Others stepped forward and were seen as key leaders in bringing the two partners together.

> The person who emerged as a leader of that collaboration was . . . a former Dean at the University of Guelph. Extremely skilled interpersonally, and I don't mean manipulatively, and trusted for academic values. So the point person at Guelph was an academically trusted individual and was able to maneuver through several areas where there could be joint programming. (P21, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration)

While important in dealing with the more hierarchical governance at a college this ability to "maneuver" was seen as particularly important when dealing with universities which are "run on collegial relations" (P29, University of Guelph, Faculty). As a result, effective leadership was critical to persuading movement in the desired direction. A participant described that situation:

> In a bicameral governance structure, it is not as if the Board of Governors or the President can decree what will happen. Because by statute, and this applies to every university in Ontario, and nearly every university in the country, it is the senate, as an independent body, that is charged with and has the authority to approve any new programs, changes to the programs, admissions requirements. In other words, they have all the academic levers. So it is necessary not to tell the university what to do but to bring a persuasive academic case in front of senate. (P21, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration)

While persuasive leadership was seen as needed in the college setting, it was seen as even more critical in the university setting which required a buy in from "the bottom up" (P23, University of Guelph, Faculty), given its bicameral division of power.

Despite what appeared to be an encouraging start, strong leadership was not always present within the University of Guelph-Humber partnership. As leaders' terms progressed, or changed, many participants felt that, at times, the institutional support for the University of

Guelph-Humber faded in step with a lack of, or a diminishing of, interest among senior leadership. The absence of senior support was at times felt at all levels of the partnership: "It has definitely been missing. It has been missing large" (P6, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration). Some participants went further, describing the "fractiousness" (P28, University of Guelph, Administration) that occurred after leadership changes.

One participant, who was heavily involved with work that required a significant Humber College contribution, was very blunt regarding the lack of support when leadership was in transition at Humber College.

> There was a time a couple of years ago where everything seemed to fall off the rails. No one was talking to anybody and shit was happening all over the place and no one knew what was happening. It wasn't good . . . people were scrambling to get stuff done or to figure out the direction Humber was going. (P6, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration)

Once new leadership was in place, however, and the expectations of the new president and other senior leaders were clear, the same participant described the improvement of relationships.

> It did change. It changed because there was a change of personnel over at Humber. Since [the new president arrived] they have had a lot of change at the executive level . . . they seem to be moving in a real positive direction and are very Guelph-Humber positive about bringing Guelph-Humber on. (P6, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration)

Other participants saw the appointment of new senior executives at Humber College and the University of Guelph leading to an improvement in the relationships (P1, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration). This was not an immediate improvement, and leadership change initially produced "a little bit of a hiatus" (P12, Humber College, Administration) and "an inability to move ideas and decisions though in a timely manner" (P16, University of Guelph-Humber, Administration).

> So as long as you had that stable piece at the top, people could anticipate what the answers were. As the personnel changed, you have to re-establish or renegotiate or be understanding. Are we still on the same page? Do we agree that this is a good thing? (P28, University of Guelph, Administration)

When the interest of the new presidents became clearer, interest in the University of Guelph-Humber issues increased, those in subordinate leadership positions came more fully onboard, and relationships were "renewed" (P12, Humber College, Administration).

Changes in senior leadership clearly caused strains within the partnerships. "Once you start bringing in a whole new senior administration and they say: 'What's that funny thing over there?' That's when it gets interesting" (P2, Administration, University of Guelph-Humber). During a major capital funding expansion submission to government in 2014, observations of the submission were that it was Humber College-centric, with limited interest expressed from the University of Guelph. "The capacity expansion initiative happened at a time when we were going through a significant transition at Guelph. New president, Provost on the way out, interim Provost—I think that created a bit of a challenge" (P22, University of Guelph, Administration). Further, along the same lines:

> Now all of the sudden there are new people and there was a little bit of a bog. Foot came off the pedal, we slowed down a little bit, because there was the need for this conversation, this getting to know one another to happen . . . I think it's picking up again. It's one of those things were we have not gotten the answer about the [next]

major capital expansion . . . I get the sense that we are at the stage where all of the new players that are in place . . . I get a sense that it's almost like the perfect time now for us to say, 'OK, we now know where we stand.' (P12, Humber College, Administration)

The restarting of leadership engagement was publically confirmed two months after this interview had been conducted, when the presidents at Humber College and the University of Guelph jointly announced interest in the next round of major capital expansion proposals (University of Guelph, 2015; Whitaker, 2015). This was a demonstration that the hiatus seen during the changeover in leadership appeared to have ended.

The views of the new leadership were now clear, and others were now willing to work in support of those views. Several participants noted increased collaboration and a sense that, as a result of the last round of leadership changes, "Guelph is moving from a place of great pessimism to a place of great optimism. And that sense of optimism is important for the partnership" (P29, University of Guelph, Faculty).

Observations

Social Interdependence is a theory that places the interaction of people while accomplishing goals as the driver of outcomes. As the University of Guelph-Humber model had seen successful outcomes, the theory would predict that there was positive goal interdependence, positive individual attitudes, and effective actions in order to affect those successful outcomes. This is what participants described in this study, although not necessarily as a result of individual cooperative orientations.

Rather than an innate orientation, comments from participants described the resulting cooperative orientation of individuals as a learned or adapted orientation based on the encouragement and expectations of the leaders. This is a classic demonstration of effective leadership, which can be defined as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (Yukl, 2006, p. 8).

Schein (2004) defined leadership specific to a mature organization as "the capacity to surmount one's own organizational culture, to be able to perceive and think about ways of doing things that are different from what the current assumptions imply" (p. 410). Yukl (2006) acknowledged that a formal definition of leadership is questioned by some due to the many different meanings to different people, but did propose the following as his definition: "Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done, and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8). Similar to Yukl (2006), Kouzes and Posner (2012) describe their work as a challenge to leaders about how they "mobilize others to want to make extraordinary things happen in organizations" (p. 2).

The participants' observations regarding leadership are in alignment with the definition of leadership as described by Yukl (2006) and the leadership challenge provided by Kouzes and Posner (2012). A review of the positive leadership attributes that participants noted shows convergence with at least four of the five effective leadership attributes posited by Kouzes and Posner (2012). These attributes include: "model the way" by clarifying and affirming shared values (pp. 42–97), "inspire a shared vision" by enlisting others to those shared visions (pp. 100–153), "challenge the process" (pp. 155–211) (something the founding presidents are described as doing), and "enable others to act" by facilitating relationships (pp. 213–269). Participants described those they held as effective leaders within the University of Guelph-Humber partnership as engaged in these four leadership attributes. Leaders described as effective had a

vision, and communicated that vision to others. Effective leaders challenged the established norms of post-secondary education through the creation of the University of Guelph-Humber partnership.

Interestingly, there were no participant comments that could be ascribed to the fifth leadership attribute described by Kouzes and Posner (2012), "encourage the heart" (pp. 272–299). This attribute is based in part on the creation of a community. Given the younger age of the partnership, the lack of the ability to hire its own staff and faculty, and a nascent sense of self-identity (Hanna, 2016), it may well be that this is a leadership attribute that has not yet developed, or produced results, to the extent that others have.

Individuals can have either a cooperative or a competitive orientation (Deutsch, 2014). In the examples provided by participants it was clear that institutionally, cooperative orientation and positive attitude was required in the partnership. But unlike the approach in Deutsch (2014), the orientation was not necessarily one possessed by individuals in general, but rather that possessed specifically by the institutional leaders. This orientation was then spread to the individuals who were carrying out the tasks required in the partnership. The lack of this leadership guidance was seen as placing a brake on cooperation, as was demonstrated during the rejected 2014 major capital funding expansion proposal submitted by the partnership. Yet when new leadership made their positive and cooperative views known, those further down the hierarchy moved toward a more positive and cooperative orientation themselves. This cooperative orientation is "decisive in determining [the] course and outcome" of relationships (Deutsch, 2014, p. 3), but the participants' observations demonstrate that this orientation can be learned or adopted based on leadership expectations.

Following the example of a leader by adopting a similar cooperative attitude is a concept that was described by several research participants, but which is not addressed in Social Interdependence Theory which concentrates more on the innate cooperative or competitive stance of individuals based on their desire for goal attainment. This current study demonstrated that a leader's attitude (cooperative or competitive), and goal attainment, could be transferred to others within the operating environment of a partnership. Participants commented that when there was lack of cooperation, it was due to a lack of clear leadership commitment to cooperation, or the failure to effectively move senior leadership expectations far enough down the hierarchy to positively influence the relationships.

This situation is, however, not a divergence from Social Interdependence Theory. Once leadership interests in cooperation were communicated, it appeared that most of those involved became cooperative themselves. Similarly, the theory posits that people are primarily cooperative (or competitive) in order to meet their own goal attainment. The question then becomes: What is the goal attainment of a person who becomes cooperative in a partnership because of leadership expectations? It is apparent that leadership expectations assisted in forming a cooperative attitude, at times not specifically to advance the partnership, but rather to advance career goals attainment (Hanna, 2016). This was demonstrated during the failed major capacity expansion proposal in 2014 when the expectations of the new University of Guelph leadership was unknown and little support was provided by those in place at the University of Guelph to advance the proposal. Once the positive expectations of new leadership were in place, a new proposal appeared to receive wide support.

This is an important observation for leaders. Their expectations, clearly communicated, influence the attitude (cooperative or competitive) of others to advance the leader's goals, not necessarily because of the adoption of the goals of the leader, but in some cases because they see

their career goals aligned with supporting the institutional goals of the leader. Social Interdependence Theory is not contradicted by this conclusion, but rather expanded to include this additional layer of goal interdependence.

The noted additional layer of goal interdependence, as described by participants, can be compared to the concept of transactional leadership. In transactional leadership, the leader uses the avoidance of punishment, or rewards for the accomplishment of a task (van Eeden, Cilliers, & van Deventer, 2008). The avoidance of punishment or the expectation of rewards can be interpreted as the goal interdependence sought by followers through their demonstration of a cooperative attitude in support of the leaders expressed interests. Participants in this study clearly observed transactional relationships when leadership was in flux—when the desired direction of leadership was unclear—and some involved in partnership decision making failed to take a stand or to provide support to the partnership. Others described more transformational leadership, especially in the early years and during decision making surrounding academic issues.

A transformational leader is one who has influence with followers, is respected and trusted, behaves ethically; a person that other wish to emulate (van Eeden, Cilliers, & van Deventer, 2008). A transformational leader mobilizes others to reform institutions" (Yukl, 2006). In transformational situations, the personality of the leader was described as instrumental in changing people's views on how the two partners could cooperate, and these views bridged the time when senior leadership was either absent of in flux.

The ability of transformational leadership to transcend the absence of a particular leader was demonstrated at the University of Guelph-Humber as a strength of this type of leadership. When goal interdependence is based on the organizational rather than personal goals, support for the organizational goals continue. When the goal interdependence is predicated on punishment avoidance or in seeking of reward, the leadership is transactional, and in this case was seen as not supporting the sustainability of the partnership during times of leadership absence. This is a demonstration of the inherent weakness of transactional, and the strength of transformational leadership.

Conclusion

There are many facets of leadership that relate to the University of Guelph-Humber partnerships. What is apparent was that leadership had kept the college and the university together in such a significant partnership. This supports the work of Ellis (2005), which addressed the observed need for a leadership commitment to support the initial creation of the University of Guelph-Humber. Being positioned well past the formative stage of the partnership, this study found that communicated leadership commitment was just as vital in maintaining and evolving the institutional and personal relationships as it was in creating them in the first place.

Whether employees buy into the goals of the leaders (transformational leadership), or they adopt those goals due to the perception of interdependence between their own career goal and the goals of the leader (transactional leadership), the fact remains that the goals of the leader—clearly communicated—influence those within the organization. Leadership was the linchpin of the partnership that has sustained an "impressive an example of cooperation between postsecondary sectors as exists anywhere in the world" (Skolnik, 2005, para. 29). While a linchpin is critical to holding a complex system together, and hence a positive influence on organizations, it is also a great vulnerability when in the absence of the linchpin, the system is

left unsupported. This is a lesson for leaders to take into consideration when examining their own leadership style. Transactional leadership may be effective at times, but may not be when the benefit or risk to the follower, as represented by the leader, is actually present. Transformational leadership, however, can be extended beyond the actual presence of the leaders themselves.

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