Shared Strategic Leading:
The Leadership of Academic Deans of Centers of Excellence in the Philippines

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Abstract
The study aimed at producing a substantive grounded theory of the leadership of academic deans of Centers of Excellence in Philippine Higher Education Institutions. The classic grounded theory method was employed. Fourteen academic deans from various disciplines and regions of the Philippines participated in the study. Participant interviews were used as the primary source of data. Data analysis was performed through classic grounded theory coding. The study concluded that shared strategic leading predominantly describes the leadership of academic deans of Centers of Excellence in the Philippines. Results showed that shared strategic leading is intrinsically influenced by the academic deans' people skills; extrinsically, by their loyalty to the institution, and experiences in learning leadership. This study recommended that other academic deans be informed of the best shared strategic leadership practices of their colleagues to improve the quality of their academic programs. Further research on academic deanship in the Philippines was also proposed.

Keywords: Higher Education, Classic Grounded Theory, Shared Strategic Leading, People Skills, Institutional Loyalty, Learning Leadership

Introduction

The Academic Dean

The 'academic dean' is specified as such to differentiate it from other deans that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may have in their organization. The term 'academic dean' has grown to be used more and more to refer to higher education leaders of discipline-specific colleges in universities (Wolverton, et al., 2001). The central concern of the academic dean is the academic program - the heart of the college, 'the point where all the forces that create the modern academy converge' (Bright and Richards, 2001, p.178). Academic deans lead from the 'middle' (Buller, 2007). They bridge central administration with the faculty; as such, they are the crucial backbone of decision making in the university (Arntzen, 2016). The praxis of academic leadership from the 'middle' and how critical it is in the success of the university is understood by studying the leadership of academic deans.

The concept of the standardized dean does not exist. The concept of deanship is different from country to country, more so across institutions in the same country (Arntzen, 2016). However, there are academic deans of colleges who lead in an environment where educational standards are much higher than others. In Philippine higher education, these are called Centers of Excellence (COEs) as recognized by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED). This study aimed to discover a theoretical framework explaining the leadership of academic deans in these COEs and develop a substantive theory to maintain this standard of excellence. Classic grounded theory methods were used to research on the interaction between the academic leadership of deans of these COEs and the environment that a COE creates.

CHED Centers of Excellence

The Philippine Higher Education Act of 1994 empowered CHED to 'identify, support and develop potential centers of excellence in program areas needed for the development of world-class scholarship, nation building and national development' (CHED, n.d.). The COE program was born as a result of this mandate. A COE is defined as a 'department within a higher education institution, which continuously demonstrates excellent performance in the areas of instruction, research and publication, extension and linkages and institutional qualifications' (CHED, n.d,). COEs provide a standard of institutional academic excellence in their respective disciplines not only in the regions where they are located, but also throughout the nation. They are prioritized among CHED's institutional partners when it comes to CHED's developmental projects and are also entitled to non-monetary subsidies and awards (CHED, 2006). On the other hand, among their broad responsibilities are upgrading research and advancing quality education in their respective disciplines.

The Problem

Table 1 shows the number of HEIs, as well as those with COEs, both public and private in all of the regions in the country. The concentration of HEIs with COEs in the country can be found in four regions: National Capital Region (29.2%), Calabarzon (11.1%), Central Visayas and Northern Mindanao (8.3% each). These four regions (out of 17) account for 56.9% of the total number of HEIs with COEs in the country. Nationwide, only 3.0 % of the HEIs have COEs. These statistics show the uneven distribution of HEIs with COEs in the country.

These data indicate that Philippine higher education has a gargantuan task of improving the quality of education on its shoulders. Needless to say, the thousands of academic deans all over the country play a major role in this. In recent decades, with the thrust for universities to be 'entrepreneurial, financially self-sufficient and innovative', the role of the academic dean became 'more demanding, more senior, more strategic, more complex' (de Boer and Goedegebuure, 2009, pp.1,4). More than their forerunners, modern deans are thus seen as 'strategic actors' with newer challenges to deal with (p.3).

Region	Total No. of HEIs	No. of HEIs with COE				% of HEIs w/ COEs in the Phil
		Public SUCs	Private	Total	% of HEIs in the region	
01-Ilocos Region	113	3	2	5	4.4	6.9
02-Cagayan Valley	73	2	2	4	5.5	5.5
03-Central Luzon	239	2	1	3	1.3	4.2
04-Calabarzon	338	3	5	8	2.4	11.1
05-Bicol Region	170	1	1	2	1.2	2.8
06-Western Visayas	155	2	1	3	1.9	4.2
07-Central Visayas	165	2	4	6	3.6	8.3
08-Eastern Visayas	89	1	-	1	1.1	1.4
09-Zamboanga Peninsula	85	1	1	2	2.4	2.8
10-Northern Mindanao	114	4	2	6	5.3	8.3
11-Davao Region	98	1	2	3	3.1	4.2
12-SOCCSKSARGEN	114	1	-	1	0.9	1.4
13-National Capital Region	347	3	18	21	6.1	29.2
14-Cordillera Administrative Region	54	1	3	4	7.4	5.5
15-Bangsamoro Autonomous Region	93	-	-	-	0.0	0.0
16-Caraga	55	1	-	1	1.8	1.4
17-MIMAROPA	91	2	-	2	2.2	2.8
Total	2,393	30	42	72	3.0	100.0

Table 1: Distribution of HEIs with COEs by Region: AY 2017-2018.
Data based on information from CHED. https://ched.gov.ph/wp-content/
uploads/2019- List-of-COE-and-CODs.pdf

The sad state of affairs is that despite these ever-growing challenges that modern academic deans face today, they assume their office with 'absolutely no training in, credentials for, or knowledge about the central duties of the position' (Gmelch and Buller, 2015, p.2). Plessis (2012, p.2) refers to this as a 'leadership crisis in higher education.' This is the reason why the journey of academic deans of COEs in HEIs in the Philippines is worthy of investigation. In the midst of the challenges confronting academic deanship in the 21st century, current and future academic deans can certainly learn from the stories of academic deans of COEs. Overseas in recent years, the volume of literature on academic leadership and in particular, academic deanship, has been steadily growing. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the Philippines. Specifically, there has been no research made on the leadership of academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs. It will be healthy for higher education in the Philippines if this research gap were filled.

Statement of Purpose

This study investigated the leadership of academic deans of COEs in HEIs in the Philippines, broadly, their personal description of their leadership role and contribution to setting a standard of institutional academic excellence in HEIs in the Philippines; and their leadership learning experiences as academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs.

Significance of the Study

The role of academic deans in higher education cannot be taken lightly. They are referred to as the 'unsung professionals of the academy,' (Rosser as cited in de Boer and Goedegebuure, 2009, p.1) the 'cornerstone of higher education' (Wolverton, et al., 2001, p.ix). In the Philippines, they share CHED's vision-mission to catalyze a 'Philippine higher education system that is locally responsive and globally competitive,' (CHED, n.d.a). A new challenge lies before them now with the uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. How can excellence be maintained in the midst of such a crisis? What demands will post-pandemic education present? In this light, research on the leadership of academic deans of COEs in HEIs in the country can inspire and provide practical applications for current and future academic deans towards excellence in the performance of their jobs. Furthermore, it can provide literature on the under-researched topic of academic deanship in the Philippines, especially on academic deanship in COEs.

Methodology

Research Design: The Classic Grounded Theory Method

The classic grounded theory method was employed in this research. Glaser and Strauss (1967,p.1) defined the method as 'the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained and analyzed in social research.' Birks and Mills (2015, p.17) cited three reasons for the appropriate use of the grounded theory method: first, when not much information is available on the topic of enquiry; second, when the coveted outcome of the research is the generation of theory that explains it; finally, when the research has an intrinsic process found in it. This research satisfied all three. The grounded theory method is especially valuable in studying processes. The line-by-line analysis of data in grounded theory promotes analytical thinking and produces results not accomplished by other methods (Urquhart, 2013).

Data Collection and Generation

Practicing reciprocity, reflexivity, and theoretical sensitivity throughout data collection and generation ensured the quality and ethical integrity of the research (Birks and Mills, 2015; Glaser, 2001; Glaser and Holton, 2004). This research employed two other foundational concepts in the classic grounded theory methodology: constant comparison and theoretical sampling. Constant comparative analysis of incidents to incidents, concepts to more incidents, and concepts to concepts led to theoretical integration (Glaser and Holton, 2004). Beginning with the initial sample, we used theoretical sampling to guide us into what data were to be collected next and where to find them for the development of the theory as it emerged (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Theoretical sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, when no new properties emerged from the pattern resulting from constant comparison in data analysis (Glaser, 2001).

Our interviews were unstructured so that we would be able to get more out of them. They gave our participants greater control and their answers directed the course that the interview took (Birks and Mills, 2015). To avoid preconception, questions were not pre-planned. Following the Glaser dictum that 'all is data,' all that was happening in the research scene, as well as all the data surrounding it was taken in as data (Glaser, 2001). We refrained from the use of extant literature as a data source until after the emergence of the core category in data analysis (Holton and Walsh, 2017). In so doing, any influence that the extant literature may have on the emergent concepts was avoided.

Participants

The initial sample was purposive. An academic dean from our home institution was invited as our initial research participant. Our home institution leads the private HEIs in the number of COEs with 14. The next 13 participating deans were chosen through theoretical sampling. For anonymity, the 14 deans were referred to as Deans A to N, representing half of the regions in the country (8/16): four in Luzon, two in the Visayas, and two in Mindanao. These deans were from 14 out of the 72 HEIs with COEs (or 19.4%). They belonged to the disciplines of Engineering, Social Sciences & Communication, Business & Management Education, Information Technology, Humanities, Teacher Education, Agriculture, and Science & Mathematics. Half of the deans were from State Universities and Colleges, while the other half were from private universities.

Data Analysis

The two types of coding in classic grounded theory were used for data analysis: substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding is the 'process of conceptualizing the empirical substance of data' (Holton and Walsh, 2017, p.80), producing substantive codes. The two stages in substantive coding are open coding and selective coding (p.87). In this research, open coding was done incident-by-incident and substantive codes were assigned (Glaser, 1978). The conceptual framework emerged once the potential core category was identified (Birks and Mills, 2015). This was when data analysis shifted from open coding to selective coding. In theory-testing research, a framework is developed from literature, used, and then extended based on the findings (Urquhart, 2013), unlike in classic grounded theory where the framework arises from the data. From here on, selective coding was limited to only those concepts significantly related to the core variable to produce a parsimonious theory (Glaser and Holton, 2004), ceasing when such concepts were no longer produced. Theoretical coding was then applied to conceptualize the possible relationship of substantive codes to each other (Urquhart, 2013), producing theoretical codes. With theoretical coding, the integration of theory began.

Writing Up a Substantive Grounded Theory

The objective for this research was to write a substantive grounded theory. A core category and four subcategories were sufficient for the conceptual needs of a substantive grounded theory (Glaser, 2012). The purpose for the write up was 'to capture the integration of the substantive grounded theory into a conceptual explanation of how a core category is continually resolved' (Glaser, 2012).

Findings/Results

We used an audit trail in presenting our research findings in order to show how the theory had emerged directly from raw data, validating the research findings and grounding them in the evidence (Bowen, 2009). The first stage of open coding analyzed data from the first four participants, Deans A, B, C, and D. The second stage of open coding analyzed data from Deans E, F, and G, all from Teacher Education, the discipline with the greatest percentage of COEs. Five categories were emergent at this point: displaying loyalty to the institution, employing people skills, devoting to the full mandate of education, learning leadership, and strategic leading, the potential core category. Strategic leading was identified as such following the criteria cited by Glaser and Holton (2004) in selecting and confirming a core category, namely: centrality, frequency, relevance, grab, and variability. As a potential core category had emerged, we used extant literature to define and describe strategic leading in greater detail.

The strategic leading model may just be the effective and practical approach to deal with ever-changing conditions happening at an accelerating pace in a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) world. Strategic leadership is also defined 'as the ability (as well as the wisdom) to make consequential decisions about ends, actions, and tactics in ambiguous environments' (Pisapia, 2009, p.7). As theorized by John Pisapia (2009), it is not dependent on a linear thinking mindset and is not limited to strategic planning which is but one of several approaches to strategy. Davies and Davies (2006) supported this in proposing the deployment of not just one, but a reserve of strategic approaches in school. Their study focused on the strategic dimension of leadership. Boyko and Jones (2010) referred to deans as strategists and department chairs, as tacticians. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has also given rise to adaptive academic leaders who responded strategically in crisis (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020).
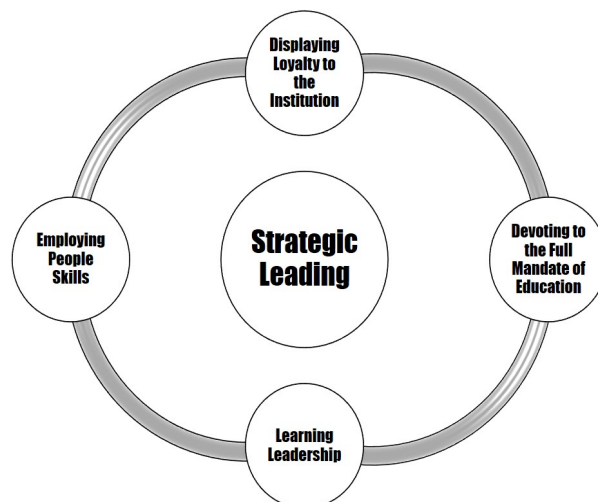

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework after Open Coding

Figure 1 (by the authors) shows the conceptual framework that emerged since the potential core category had been identified. The radial cycle framework is used to show the relationship of the four sub-categories to the emerging core category. It gives emphasis to strategic leading as the emerging core category and the contribution of the four sub-categories to its behavior.

Shared Strategic Leading as Core Category

In the first stage of selective coding, we continued our analysis with additional data gathered from Deans H to L. We were more 'selective' in continuing only with codes and concepts which were related to the emerging core category strategic leading. We noted at this stage of the analysis that a number of deans related incidents of sharing specific strategic functions with their subordinates. Among the concepts under strategic leading, the concept empowering to execute the vision had the most number of incidents from the most number of deans (10/12). This concept covered incidents which referred to the empowering of college administration, faculty, staff, and students to participate in the fulfilment of the vision. It has been said many times over, we live in challenging times. Strategic leadership then has become necessary for organizational members at all levels of the organization. Duursema (2013) refers to this as shared strategic leadership. In shared strategic leadership, the strategic functions are distributed and shared with the other team members and effectuated by them, making the process a collective effort (Duursema, 2013). It is a conscious effort to move beyond the leader-follower dyad in leading organizations and is found to be a more important factor than vertical leadership in bringing about team effectiveness. A study of sixty-seven articles on strategic leadership identified the involvement of the staff in planning and action and leading collaborative practices, as well as the promotion of professional development outside of central administration, as among its main features (Carvalho et al., 2021). This is similar to the findings of Witherspoon (2019) as to what strategic leading is in reality – i.e., it is practiced at every level of the organization. Mustering their abilities as they are empowered and equipped, these team members are able to help in accomplishing the strategic goals of the organization. With these results and literature, we identified shared strategic leading as the new emergent core category.

Data from the last two deans (Deans M and N) were analyzed in the second stage of selective coding. Before the start of the second stage of selective coding, shared strategic leading was identified as the emergent core category. It remained as such at the end of the second stage, again satisfying the criteria set by Glaser and Holton (2004) in identifying core categories. This study showed that shared strategic leading predominantly describes the leadership of academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs. Much as there is a standard to be maintained, i.e. being a COE, all the more there was a need for the deans to be strategic with their functions and make the process a collective effort by sharing these with the rest of the team at every level of the organization.

Shared strategic leading was identified as a basic social structural process, satisfying the criteria set forth by Glaser (1978), As such, it emphasized the wider social structure regarding the main phenomenon. It accounted for the changes in the various sectors in the HEI as it progressed through its various stages. The subsequent identification of conceptual relationships between the core category and the sub-categories then paved the way for the emergence of a parsimonious theory.

Conceptual Relationships

From analyzing the data gathered after interviewing the 14th academic dean, no new properties emerged, only more indicators of the same properties. Theoretical saturation had been reached (Holton and Walsh, 2017). As that which theoretically integrates the core category and related concepts, theoretical codes then gave 'integrative scope, broad pictures and a new perspective' of the categories that had been saturated (Glaser, 1978, p.72). The

emergent conceptual relationships between the core category and the related sub-categories were identified by employing the coding families suggested by Glaser (1978) and literature.

The theoretical code describing the conceptual relationship between shared strategic leading and employing people skills was 'building.' From Glaser (1978), the relationship could be coded as mainline, particularly social interaction and socialization (i.e., training people for participation). Citing consensus, goodwill, and trust as conditions for the success of strategic leadership, Glotzboch (2009) emphasized the need to lead interactively. The findings of Witherspoon (2019) on the actual practices of strategic leading connected shared strategic leading with employing people skills (establishing a sense of community, reinforcing self-value, strengthening relationships, and harnessing the collective strategic capacity of all employees). The deans related incidents on how sharing specific strategic functions with their subordinates was influenced by their people skills: e.g., in 'building' and maintaining healthy relationships and in 'building' unity. Evidently, there was a strong link here between shared strategic leading and employing people skills. In fact, employing people skills showed to be an intrinsic factor in shared strategic leading. This is stated in Proposition 1.

The theoretical code describing the conceptual relationship between shared strategic leading and displaying loyalty to the institution was 'attracting.' From Glaser (1978), the relationship could be coded as mainline, particularly social control (i.e., keeping people in line). In a study made on academic leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) cited that by constantly reassuring the stakeholders that their strategic vision for crisis resolution was in keeping with the institutional goals and mission, academic leaders were 'attracting' institutional buy-in and commitment of the stakeholders. Strategic leadership as practiced in every level of the organization gets the team more invested in its success (Witherspoon, 2019). In our study, more than 85% of our deans have been serving their colleges for at least 15 years. Such Loyalty to the institution has resulted in 'attracting' like dedication from faculty, staff, students, and alumni. In all these, the deans displaying loyalty to the institution proved to be an extrinsic factor in shared strategic leading. This is stated in Proposition 2.

The theoretical code describing the conceptual relationship between shared strategic leading and learning leadership is 'continuing.' From Glaser (1978), the relationship could be coded as mainline, particularly socialization (i.e., training people for participation). According to Thompson, et al. (2006), the chances of 'continuing' short-term and long-term organizational leadership are improved with the existence of systematic and effective succession planning in the organization. Long, et al. (2013) define succession planning as 'a proactive process that ensures "continuing" leadership committed to the organization's value, mission, and strategic plan by intentionally developing employees within the organization for advancement' (p. 73). The deans shared experiences on how they learned leadership through the mentoring of their former deans, on plans to continue what their former deans had started, and how conscience dictated for them to accept the deanship for another term. Learning leadership then emerged as another extrinsic factor in shared strategic leading. This is stated in Proposition 3.

After analyzing and validating the emergent core category and its conceptual relationships with the emergent sub-categories, we came up with the emergent theoretical model for "The Leadership of Academic Deans of Centers of Excellence in the Philippines" as shown in Figure 2 by the authors. The emergent substantive theory and its propositions are also summarized.

The Emergent Theoretical Model

Figure 2. The Emergent Theoretical Model
Shared Strategic Leading:
The Leadership of Academic Deans of Centers of Excellence in the Philippines

The position of shared strategic leading in the middle and its size compared to that of the sub-categories speak of its centrality and grab in the main concern of the study. The model makes use of spheres since shared strategic leading as a process is multi-directional, not linear. Employing people skills is shown inside shared strategic leading due to its intrinsic relationship with the latter. Displaying loyalty to the institution and learning leadership also influence shared strategic leading, but not to the extent that employing people skills does and are thus found outside of shared strategic leading.

The Substantive Theory and its Propositions

Shared strategic leading predominantly describes the leadership of academic deans of COEs in HEIs in the Philippines. In achieving and/or maintaining the status of their colleges as homes to COEs, these academic deans lead strategically with their faculty, staff, and students and empower them to participate in fulfilling and sustaining the vision for educational excellence. Their shared strategic leading is intrinsically influenced by their people skills and extrinsically, by their loyalty to the institution and commitment to learn leadership. The relationship between shared strategic leading and employing people skills, displaying loyalty to the institution, and learning leadership are stated in the following propositions:

Proposition 1. Academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs successfully implement shared strategic leading in their colleges by employing their people skills in building trust for leadership, a sense of community, and the collective strategic capacity of both faculty and staff.

Proposition 2. The Shared strategic leading of academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs is positively influenced by the deans' loyalty to the institution, as a result attracting institutional commitment and investment by stakeholders.

Proposition 3. The learning leadership practices of academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs ensure continuing shared strategic leading in the organization.

There is a consensus among the participating deans that the recognition of their colleges as COEs is to be a priority. It is acknowledged that such recognition does not come by happenstance. The main responsibility of applying for and maintaining the recognition may be within the purview of the department but we have seen that in reality, the whole college is involved. Furthermore, the support of central administration is vital.

More than the prestige that comes with the recognition, the participating academic deans are very much aware of the responsibilities that come with it. Theirs is the responsibility to raise the standard in higher education by imparting their expertise to the rest of the province, region, and nation. The conviction as a COE must first be an inner reality for the dean. As one of the deans aptly put it, the recognition of being a COE starts in the mind. The externals confirm inner realities.

The leadership of a college that is a COE is therefore for those who will get their faculty, staff, and students to share and participate in fulfilling this responsibility. Not all HEIs aspire to be COEs. Some do but fall short of achieving such a recognition. This substantive theory shows us what kind of leadership is successfully accomplishing it. It is shared strategic leading. As it is now generally accepted that leaders are mainly made and not born, shared strategic leading can then be learned. This substantive theory can be of help in this regard.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, we conclude that academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs apply shared strategic leading in achieving and/or maintaining the status of their colleges as homes to COEs. They also involve their faculty, staff, and students in fulfilling and sustaining the college's vision for educational excellence. Finally, the shared strategic leading of academic deans of COEs in Philippine HEIs is intrinsically influenced by their people skills, and extrinsically by their loyalty to the institution and their experiences in learning leadership.

Based on our conclusions, we recommend that the results of this study be made available to the other academic deans in the country as a reference for improving the quality of their academic programs. Secondly, we further recommend that the same results be communicated to the top administration of Philippine HEIs to offer them ideas in preparing their prospects for deanship. Lastly, further research on this topic should be done. For one, there is an unfortunate lack of research on academic deanship in the country, more so on academic deanship in COEs. Much can be learned from exemplars, as well as from academic deans who may be faced with unique challenges in their respective colleges. Research on theoretical models for strategic leadership in schools can also be undertaken.

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