

LEADERSHIP FUNCTION IN TECHNICAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

*Dr. O.N. Wakhlu

Introduction :

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of leadership function in technical education institutions for their better performance. In a democratic society, leadership responsibility is widespread amongst the personnel, and effective leadership at all levels is the *sine qua non* of an efficient and well managed institution. Although management consciousness has grown within the educational institutions, few are really being managed for performance. There is a need for a closer look at the management of these organisations, and increasingly a higher standard of performance by the personnel is demanded.

The author has put forth some ideas on the basis of his own experience gathered over the last three decades while working in institutions of technical education in India, United Kingdom and Germany. In our attempt to understand the leadership function and improve upon it, the best course appears to be to share ideas and experience on the subject which will lead to development of better methods and concepts. Ultimately the touchstone of all these concepts will be the resul-

tant quality of performance. Some basic questions have been raised in this paper which need consideration by the staff in the institutions in order to shape their creative responses to challenges and problem solving in the discharge of their leadership function.

It has been a widespread feeling that the performance of technical education institutions is not impressive. These have grown larger, and their budgets have grown faster.

Earlier, their performance was taken for granted. But today there is all the pressure from financing agencies for a concrete evidence of performance viz. the things accomplished vis-a-vis the money spent, and the contribution made to the common weal. These are the yardsticks applied to assess the relevance of these institutions to society.

Accountability is yet another norm mentioned in the above context. This refers to staff assuming responsibility for the kind of institution they make and acknowledging their role in doing so. Accountability does not end up with merely blaming (1) the government, the students, or the management, and vice-

versa. The staff must accept full responsibility for setting objectives, their actions, and their thoughts. Their accountability is also to the society, and the concerned legal and financial agencies. Specific descriptions of the ways in which accountability will be operated and measured have to be evolved.

'Charters', which include statements on the 'mission' and 'guiding principles' of education and training, as well as preparation of annual 'corporate plans' by the Chief Executive Officer of the Institution are here to stay as part of educational management elsewhere (2). The Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, also introduced a system of performance oriented strategy for financial grants to technical colleges in November 1986. Projections of performance were made for a five-year and longer periods commensurate with financial inputs. This became widely known as Programme of Action (POA).

Purpose of Technical Education Institutions :

The main function of the institutions for technical education is to educate and train students equipping them with high technical competence, proper social awareness, and communication skills commensurate with their professional calling to create engineered systems for the benefit of humankind. The institutions must also carry out research in technology, and interact with industry and the national economy through extension work, consultancy, and developmental work. There must be equilateral harmony between these three functions, otherwise the institutions will not come upto desired levels of good performance.

Education must aim at making students creative professional engineers who are in

harmony with themselves, with the society, and the environment. They must also possess integrity and character to design their works keeping in mind the cardinal principles of system design namely; safety, economy and beauty, in sharp focus. Imagination and character have been the hallmarks of the giants of the engineering profession, and these qualities have counted above all as compared with mathematics and physical science. The students must be trained to believe that they can succeed.

"They never achieve anything
who do not believe in success."

said the father of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps. As it happened, he was not an engineer, but the whole world thought he was.

Institutions of Technical Education are of vital importance to society. The national economy provides the institutes with **problems, experience, students, technicians, and teachers**. Within the institutions, it is the co-ordinated efforts of students, technicians, professors, research scholars and the workshops that provides the industry with **solutions, new ideas, innovative technology, academics and engineers**. The institute is a dynamic entity and so are the interactions of people within it, where ideas fructify into progress and innovation. Imparting of knowledge is as much part of the function of the institution as is creation of new technology.

Management of Institutions :

The abovementioned objectives of technical education are sought to be achieved through the organisational efforts of the institutions. If there are deficiencies in performance, the leadership of the institute must own responsibility for these, and devise ways and means

to rectify the situation. These institutes are like industry and they are equally in need of management. They all have people working who are paid for doing a specific job including management; although the managers may be designated as deans, professors, or registrars and so on. Technical institutions must be managed for performance. They must be spontaneous in response to change. The leadership function of continual evaluation of the organisation, its goals, inputs into the system and the quality of output, and making the desired changes as required, become very important.

In a typical technical institution, there is a four sided interaction between **students, technicians, academics and administrators**, the students holding a pivotal position being the main vital and dynamic component of the organisation and the focus of its functions. The organisation charts should provide guidelines for smooth functioning of each person so that they can carry out their assigned tasks with efficiency and without any friction. The organisation comprises human beings, and besides organisation charts, it needs another constant input of a special kind. This input is a function of leadership; not only at the apex level of a pyramidal set-up, but all through and across the organisational levels. Indeed, there is need for replacing the rigid hierarchical set-up by a more organic type suited to dynamic functioning. Emphasis is placed upon directing all specifications, skills, and knowledge on organisational tasks; and authority, control, and communication are integrated into a net-work structure rather than a hierarchy.

The leadership must be flexible in order to be able to effect change with the least disruption. Changes are needed fast but this must be achieved without straining the system too much. The system behaviour of the institute

can be thought of as stochastic *rather* than *deterministic* as it primarily depends on the inputs of so many human beings, often highly intelligent and individualistic. Therefore, a uniform generalized approach to tackling problems is limited to only a few common problems. For the most part, creative solutions will depend on the quality of leadership inputs.

It is the function of leadership to focus the attention of the staff on the things under their control; brain storming personnel for seeing the multitude of available options to tackling a situation; and making their minds free and open to get into a position of creative thinking or possibility thinking. Leadership function is to motivate human resource, understand human nature, and get the people to work together in the organisation harmoniously, creatively, and with joy, in their respective spheres. Leadership function is concerned with people, tasks, goals and fair play. Negative people, those who often blame others for their non-performance, have to be motivated to acquire positive attributes and become accountable to themselves. It is the role of leadership to minimize the effect of constraints on the working of the institution so that predetermined goals are accomplished. And above all, this has to be done without anyone getting the feeling of being pushed around. This is a delicate role for everyone in a leadership position.

Some Obvious Constraints :

Let us examine some of the shortcomings in the technical education institution which have to be dealt with by the leadership personnel. The foremost is the paucity of funds for almost everything that needs to be done. Because of the compelling pressures for the scarce funds of a poor country, we delude ourselves by wishful thinking that we shall

get all the money asked for achieving our goals. Yet, this money is not going to be available. This situation provides an easy excuse for indolence and poor performance by the staff. A forceful and effective leader uses the meagre resources for ambitious, but attainable goals, and solely for tasks that absolutely need doing, which in short means thinking and acting strategically (3).

The large number of personnel employed in the institutions and coupled with their poor quality is another constraint. Indisciplines and agitations are the result of this, besides low employee morale. The best that can be done is to make the best use of their skills for productivity, often with a stint of short period retraining of the people for specific tasks.

Teachers and students present a different kind of problem. Their intellectual capacities are well above average but their backgrounds and their perceptions about many social situations vary widely. Even behaviour patterns under certain crisis situations become totally unpredictable. The teacher must always be seen by his students to be well occupied professionally. This educates better than all the lecturing in the class. However, this is not so. In any institution there is a large proportion of teachers who think a day's job is done when they have lectured a couple of hours. What the teachers and the institutes make of the students input and in what manner, determines the true measure of the quality of leadership present in the dynamic organisation of the institute. No doubt, the product of the technical institute viz. the engineering graduate cannot be subject to the same type of quality control as prevails in a manufacturing concern; individuality has to be respected and encouraged for innovation and creativity. Flexibility in approach would therefore, be the cornerstone of good leadership in the academic setting. A new curriculum for en-

gineers' education has been proposed for this objectives. (4).

Leadership :

A leader in the academic setting would be a person who has the necessary personal characteristics, knowledge, and command of relevant expertise to formulate sound policy, set proper goals, and ensure through his team, their economical and successful implementation. The desirable personal qualities required are *wisdom, integrity, objectivity, courage and vision*. Wisdom is the pre-requisite of sound judgement and includes a talent for understanding human nature individually and collectively. Integrity is the essence of being true to oneself, and consistent in thoughts, words and deeds, in one's dealings with others. Sound judgement also depends on objectivity, which also means judging all courses of action impartially. Courage is the product of directed energy, and enthusiasm resulting in a dynamic approach to decision making, and following the decision through to effective implementation. Vision is necessary for creative leadership. The leader has to work ahead of his team and to have an eye on the future. The teachers in their role as leaders find the institution subject to conflicting pressures and influences from many sectors. They have to show by example that they are committed to success. Communication has to be improved around, and targets achieved.

Leadership function involves planning, organising, direction, co-ordination, and control. These functions result in setting objectives, building up teams, laying down targets, co-ordinating the work of departments, and finally supervising work and asking for results. The teachers as academic leaders must be relentless, and ruthless with themselves in the pursuit of objectives, and never allow the various constraints to retard their

constant striving for excellence in the profession nor to slacken their commitment to seek excellence from their students. In the action-centred approach to leadership function, the leader has to clarify the TASKS of the group, setting goals, allocating resources; holding the GROUP together to achieve the task; and looking after INDIVIDUAL needs, encouraging, giving recognition etc. and applying discipline. This approach is simple and helps the leader to improve his performance.

The academic leader has to deal with many human problems. Solving them he must exhibit tact, firmness, sympathy, patience and understanding. In respect of administrative policy there must be consistency, legitimacy and balance between competing pressures. And above all, every action has to be weighed on the touchstone of FAIRNESS.

The success of leadership will also depend on the modernisation of the teacher-student groups in the institution. There are many residual conflicts as between tradition and modernity. These have to be resolved and reconciled. This can be achieved by listening to each other with humility and respect; be truthful and forthright in expressing our views; be sincerely interested in the progress of the institution; and exhibit integrity and character. Emphasising the value of character, Mahatma Gandhi has rightly said, *"The end of all knowledge should be the building of character"*.

No leadership role will be a total success without the leader being deeply rooted in spiritual values; the most vital being that of unboundedness, freedom and total awareness of oneness with the universal, all pervading energy. Time is not far off when a unified scientific theory relating matter, energy, living cells, and cosmic intelligence (information), shall be available to human-

kind. It might then be easier for us to see the wisdom of the seers who have over centuries propounded the values of *PEACE, LOVE, HUMANISM* and *DISCIPLINE* as the very foundations (dharma) of human existence.

Conclusion :

Excellence and scientific approach must be our objective. The success of leadership function will be seen by results, research expansion, benefit to society, and the quality of student output. Research and development must go hand in hand. Flexibility, creativity and innovation are the hallmarks of good institutional leadership. These need profound encouragement.

References :

1. Wakhlu, A.,
"The Management of Blaming",
Maharashtra Herald,
Dec. 21, 1989.
2. "Learning for Life, Two :
Education and Training Beyond the
Age of Fifteen : Policy Decisions ,
August 1989."
3. Mendoz, Gabino, A.,
"The Three Temptations of the
Management Teacher.",
World Executive's Digest,
July 1989, pp. 40-45.
4. Wakhlu, O.N.,
"A New Curriculum for
Engineers' Education".
World Conf. of Engg. Education
for Advancing Technology,
Instn. of Engrs., Australia,
Feb. 89, No. 89/1, pp 766-771.

□ □