Diplomatic Manoeuvres: How those in leading from the middle become a conduit for change

Having both spent many years as middle leaders in HE institutions in the UK, the task of balancing the concerns of individuals that are managed, whilst ensuring the effective implementation of policies directed by those above, is very familiar. The role of the middle leader can be described as being both an enactor of policy and an umbrella to protect those below from excesses. Hargreaves (2023: 34) contends that without communication with the middle leader 'the top lacks first-hand knowledge and the bottom lacks colleagues who can communicate and connect to what is happening'. It is undoubtedly true that in any large organisation, those at the top depend on others further down the hierarchy to ensure that proposed initiatives become reality.

This can lead to interesting dilemmas which is especially true when putting into place something where you either disagree or think there should be modification before implementation. When this happens a common tactic is to use 'the narrative' approach to decision-making; a well-established approach in research (Tomaszewski *et al* 2020) to explain complex ideas, often in a more themed manner. This approach can help to make sense of *why* an action is being taken, *what* needs to occur and *when* it is needed. It can humanise decision-making by suggesting two-way communication structure where things are explained not enforced as in the concept of 'Collaborative Professionalism' (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018); creating stronger, better professional practice together.

The role of middle leaders can be extremely challenging, requiring many skills to ensure the needs of those both parties are adequately addressed. The power imbalance that exists between senior and middle leaders, as well as middle leaders and those enacting the decisions below, means it is a balancing act. To prevent tensions, damaged relationships, poor morale and essential policies not being enacted, middle leaders should handle situations cautiously and sensitively, with the correct blend of understanding and determination to ensure policies are implemented.

Although middle leaders often have minimal influence on policymaking, they are usually responsible for conveying policies. When they are not well received, they generally receive the complaints or have to deal with negative feedback. This issue can be compounded when policies are imposed at the university level and staff feel that little/consideration or consultation has been given to take account of local nuances, this could be categorised as a 'push' change (Fullan, 2011). When these situations arise, middle leaders can play a valuable role by listening and conveying concerns upwards. This gives the opportunity to build stronger, positive relationships with those they lead. Leaders can use these, challenging issues to gain the confidence and trust of staff. By listening to the pressures   academics face and responding with understanding, they are more likely to reap better results and policies will be implemented appropriately.

Middle leaders need to remember that employee voice is two-way communication (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). The middle leader has huge responsibility with vast amounts of information coming upwards and downwards to them all the time. They need to remember, therefore, that the role is not just about reacting to events and requests. but also, about introducing initiatives to help improve the university/faculty/department that they work for. It is easy to spend the whole time reacting, but middle leaders must also leave time for reflection and learning to make sure that their role has a positive impact.

The middle leader is key to the organisation, with huge responsibility yet on the surface little obvious power. To ensure that the role is effective, it is important that they build relationships on

both sides. This will help with how effective they are in the role, ensuring those below them do not feel overwhelmed, feel listened to, and do not feel isolated, whilst those above are confident policies will be enacted in a proper manner. Dealing with these dual pressures effectively will ensure that there will be success stories and the organisation will run smoothly. In effect, when the role is performed well, these key people become a conduit between those at the top and those below and as such, the power that they have grows to such an extent that they become key figures within the organisation.

References

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