Lessons on Leadership

In order to study leadership and observe leadership styles, I took the opportunity to observe a meeting of the department chairs in the College of Arts and Sciences. The meeting was one of the regular meetings of this group, which is led by the Dean of the college, Dan Thurber, and consists of the chairs of the ten academic departments. Also in attendance was the provost and assistant provost, the dean of the college of education, the director of international education, the assessment coordinator and the four members of the assessment committee. The assessment personnel were there for the first half of the two-hour meeting, which focused on program assessment in the departments. This was the first meeting of the academic year, so at least four of the department chairpersons were attending their first meeting.

This was a very interesting meeting in which to observe leadership styles because with the exception of the four members of the assessment committee and me, everyone at the meeting holds a leadership position at the university. Fortunately there were no particularly contentious issues on the agenda, so the discussion was very polite and relaxed. While nearly everyone at the meeting held a formal leadership position, there were three people with the main leadership roles.

The primary leader of the meeting was the dean of the college of arts and sciences, Dan Thurber. Dan is a quiet, thoughtful individual who always projects a very caring attitude to those around him. This was his meeting, and it was very interesting to see him run it. He mainly acted as a facilitator, moving the meeting along, preventing discussion from getting bogged down at any point, and ensuring that each department chair had a chance to describe their assessment plans. There were two cases where Dan had not received plans from departments, and during the discussion he quietly moved about the room and spoke to the two chairs privately to see if they had something to present. I was impressed with the unobtrusive way in which Dan made sure that no one was put on the spot or embarrassed by not having anything to present. It turned out that there was a communication error and everyone else had the documents except Dan; when he found this out he acknowledged the error, took responsibility for it, and made a joke to lighten the mood and keep the process moving along. Despite his quiet demeanor, Dan was also able to firmly break into the discussion and move it along to the next point. He
was able to do this in a way that was clear to everyone that the discussion would move on, without interrupting, cutting off, or in any other way exhibiting dominance over any individual. I was very impressed with the way Dan was able to overcome his naturally quiet personality to achieve a level of assertiveness necessary to move the meeting along. Dan prefers to lead by consensus rather than dictate. When a proposal for a new minor was presented, Dan made sure that everyone had their say, that all questions were aired. He also summarized the issue, so that everyone was on the same page. In the end there were some issues with the proposal that could not be resolved during the meeting, so rather than force a consensus or simply make a decision himself or end discussion through a vote, Dan delegated the proposal to one chair to make the changes the group suggested, and suggested that they look at it again next time.

The provost, Jenny Roebke, was also a leader in the meeting. Jenny has only been provost for a couple years and still feels new at the role. In her leadership interactions Jenny exhibits a self-deprecating humor, earnestness, and a desire to move forward. Jenny is forthcoming with her belief that she is not assertive enough, although with the authority of her position and her time at the university, she seems able to make her point strongly enough. At this meeting, Jenny was the voice of authority in the discussion of the departmental assessment plans. It was her directive to the chairs that departments all come up with new plans, and she provided the model for what they should contain. So during the discussion of the plans, questions about them were directed to Jenny.

It was very interesting to see Dan and Jenny work together. This was Dan’s meeting, and he led it. Dan determined the agenda, how long discussion should go, and the order in which chairs presented their plans. Once the discussion was underway, Jenny answered specific questions about the plans, while Dan continued to lead the flow of the meeting. At no point did either step into the other’s domain – Dan never answered a question about the assessment plans, Jenny never initiated, stopped or changed the direction of the discussion. I am fairly certain that they never had to discuss this, they simply understood their roles and were content to contribute only what they were supposed to.

The third main leader at the meeting was Andy Langewisch, the assessment coordinator. Andy is a fairly quiet, thoughtful, analytic personality who has a tendency to
be stubborn (or, “dogged”) and has a difficult time adjusting to new situations. It is Andy’s job to collect the data generated by the assessment plans and record it in a database that is accessible and meaningful to whoever needs it. In this role he was often asked questions about the data generated by the new plans. Andy also had particular views on how the plans should look. He wanted plans that were all uniform, all assessed programs in a similar way, and all generated data that was similar to what was done in the past. This view of the process, however, was at odds with what the provost was asking for, namely plans that were adapted to the particular departments and that would generate data useful to the departments. Because he was not fully on board with the provost’s vision for the plans, Andy often made suggestions or asked questions about the plans that revealed his desire for how the plans should look. Since this not supported by the provost, however, Andy began to lose credibility through the meeting, as he continually tried to change plans that already had the support of the chairs and the provost.

So the three primary leaders in the meeting were the dean, who was trying to make the meeting flow smoothly and productively; the provost, who was the voice of authority on the content of the agenda, trying to help the departments develop meaningful plans; and the assessment coordinator, who was trying to make the plans fit his personal view. (In fairness, the assessment coordinator was also trying to make the new plans fit in with the data generated by past plans so the historical data could still be used, but his views went past this issue to a particular view of how the plans should be worded.) It was interesting to see how the individuals who were trying to help the chairs move forward productively were the ones who were looked at as leaders in the meeting, while the individual trying to advance his own vision was taken less and less seriously as the meeting progressed.

I was also impressed during the meeting that generally the participants deferred to the individuals with the most direct knowledge about an issue. So, for example, if the discussion moved to general education, the coordinator of gen ed would speak to the issue, and then the discussion would move on to something new, the question being answered. This is how things should work, but too often it seems (especially in academia) that everyone fancies himself an expert on everything and real experts do not
receive the credibility they deserve. In this meeting the experts were silently acknowledged as such, their voices held authority.

Observing leadership styles at this meeting of the department chairs was enlightening for me. I was most impressed with the dean’s ability to gently but firmly move the process forward. He was a facilitator and a consensus-builder, but was open to constructive criticism and dissent toward proposals. It was clear that his primary goal was ensuring that the process worked – that everyone had their say, that questions were aired and answered, and that problems, when they could not be resolved through discussion, were dealt with by the concerned individuals. This person is someone I will continue to observe and try to emulate. In contrast, I was struck by how little success the assessment coordinator had in trying to move the participants around to his way of thinking through pointed questions and comments. The department chairs clearly recognized that the coordinator was trying to convince them to change their plans, and they simply were not being persuaded. This style of leadership may have worked for the coordinator when dealing with students, but it was ineffective with this group. I can also learn from the coordinator’s dilemma. In meetings I often have a vision for how I think things should work out, and as a normal member of the group I might try to persuade others to my way of thinking. But as a leader of a group, I need to be more concerned about the process. I need to make sure that I’ve made the overall vision clear, and then step back and let the people who know best do their work in a way that will be most effective and productive.