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Connecting the dots for Professional Practice in Higher Education: Leadership, Energy Management and Motivation

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Abstract

This chapter considers the contexts for leadership and work in higher education at a time described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). It does so by connecting the dots between leadership, energy management and motivation to call for the creative energies of all who work in higher education to be called upon to meet these challenges. It is also a time where leader and follower distinctions are increasingly moot given that all involved in knowledge work have responsibilities for both leading and following well, no matter the formal responsibilities held.

The chapter discusses ‘energy management’ as a useful through line for contemporary leadership studies and professional practice in higher education. Today professional staff repertoires include soft skills and behaviours which rely heavily on knowing the self well. Here the idea of the *T-Shaped professional* is a term that elevates the many tangible and intangible strands necessary for higher education management work in knowledge-intensive institutions.

The chapter also explores these ideas through a case study of motivational and other energy related drivers elicited from the lived experiences of work and leadership shared by 226 professional staff members working in Australian universities.

Introduction

This chapter considers the contexts for leadership and work in higher education at a time described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). This is a time where the creative energies of all who work in knowledge-intensive enterprises like universities will be called upon to meet these challenges. It is also a time where separation of leader and follower distinctions are increasingly moot given that all involved in knowledge work have responsibilities for both leading and following well, no matter the formal role held.

Professional staff leadership development imperatives for these times are usefully captured by the idea that ‘leaders are in the business of energy management’ Kets de Vries (2003, p. 111). This focuses attention upon ways to work with the complex, turbulent and fast moving contexts that underpin and challenge work today and considers leadership as professional practice rather than traits residing on the ‘heroic’ leader, as Raelin (2016b) makes clear:

The foundation of the leadership-as-practice approach is its underlying belief that leadership occurs as a practice rather than from the traits or behaviours of individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome. Accordingly, leadership-as-practice is less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together [and]...how leadership emerges through day-to-day experience (p. 3).

The idea that energy management is now a key leadership responsibility may be novel, yet it provides a useful lens for reflection by professional staff, as well as the higher education sector more generally, to consider preparedness for significant changes ahead. In so doing, as the case study and literature will show, concerns about high levels of staff disengagement in higher education (Bolden et al., 2015, p. 6) and O'Boyle and Harter (2013, pp. 111-113) estimate that engagement levels more broadly in Australia are as low as 24% are evident. Given these concerns, ignoring motivations and energy management—of ourselves, our staff and our institutions—works against business objectives too, as Raelin (2016a, p. 124) notes:

What's wrong with our leaders? With no measurable change in the vital statistics compiled by the Gallup organisation for over a decade that some 70% of our employees are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work, why haven't they done more?

Taking up challenges to reroute leadership and leadership development (Bolden et al., 2016; Ladkin, 2010), this chapter positions leadership studies and practice for professional staff within a turn towards post-heroic leadership studies and away from “the ‘leader’ as control agent, to ‘leading’ which opens up spaces to consider more creative, shared and collaborative approaches in the field” (Davis & Jones, 2014, p. 367). These shifts are already taking place, and can be further encouraged through shared language for more expansive understandings of leading as action and practice. Thinking about leadership for professional staff in this way signifies the inherent link between leadership and responsibility that knowledge workers are already innately aware of, whether in formal leadership positions or not. Raelin (2016a) encapsulates this shift:

Employees aren't necessarily looking to be taken care of. Most of them, given the chance and the time to get their confidence back, wish to participate in the enterprise through their own collective practices. When engaged this way, the practice of leadership becomes less about what's residing in the hearts and minds of named leaders and more about how to facilitate the dedicated activities of those doing the work (p. 124).

Key to what motivates professional staff for knowledge work in these contexts is crucial—as this is also the space occupied by professional staff in higher education. The higher education sector is not impervious to disruptive change and needs to effectively harness the knowledge, ideas and creativity to support the necessary and ongoing service innovation and improvement agenda. This line of enquiry naturally leads to consideration of what may be contained within minds of knowledge workers, where intangible factors like soft skills are increasingly acknowledged as important for knowledge work. Indeed, the time has well passed, if it ever existed, where professional staff employed as managers, leaders and specialists in the sector can get by on technical ability alone. In other words, whilst hard won technical abilities in chosen professions or niche knowledge areas in higher education are necessary, they are not likely sufficient.

Today professional staff repertoires are enhanced by these softer skills and behaviours which rely heavily on knowing the self well. Here the idea of the *T-Shaped professional* connects and defines the many strands necessary to undertake and lead knowledge work. It adds to the professional vocabulary so it is possible to meaningfully reflect upon and discuss this kind of work. Soft skills are part of broad boundary crossing skills located within the horizontal part of the letter ‘T’; whilst technical requirements of roles are captured in the vertical (Hansen & von Oetinger, 2001). Further, Demirkan and Spohrer (2015) point to the organisational imperative to engage with hearts as well as minds in order to recruit and retain people with these specialised skills and attributes:

T-shaped people are in great demand. Winning—and keeping—they requires a concerted effort to build the kind of values, beliefs, skills and behaviours to support them. Companies need to think about how they can tune up their talent engines to find and foster the right talents to sustain innovation” (p. 14).

In turn, this standpoint encourages conversations about how to best harness the creative energies of all to “not merely produce the reliable result [but rather] reliably produce the desired result” (Martin, 2009, p. 156) and the next section of this chapter drills a little deeper into elements of the often invisible soft skills, namely energy management and motivations for knowledge work.

Energy Management

The connection between the ideas of energy management and motivation as leadership responsibilities are not new, as Kets de Vries (2003) argues that ‘leaders are in the business of energy management’ (p. 111) and Loehr and Schwartz (2003) posit that “leaders are the stewards of organizational energy ... [where] the skilful management of energy, individually and organizationally, makes full engagement possible” (p. 5).

Indeed, the connection between energy management and leadership can be traced to the work of Mary Parker Follett almost 100 years ago. Follett’s views on the significance of purpose, energies and leadership were recorded on at least three occasions: leaders “release energy, unite

energies, and all with the object not only of carrying out a purpose, but of creating further and larger purposes” (1927, p. 268); “there is energy, passion, unawakened life in us—those who call it forth are our leaders” (Follett, 1928, p. 293); and that great leaders “develop power wherever he can among those who work with him, then ... gathers all this power and uses it as the energising force of a progressing enterprise” (1933, p. 173). Follett was also instrumental in the Human Relations Movement of the 1930’s (see for example, Barnard, 1938; Barnard, 1948; Mayo, 1919). The revival of energy management as a leadership consideration has gained momentum since the turn of the 21st century after remaining unprivileged, as soft skills more generally were, for the last part of the 20th century. Humane ideals were out of favour during this period because they were out of kilter with dominant rationalist mindsets of the second half of the 20th century, which in turn underpinned economic, political, science and management discourse and practice in the West during this period. As mindsets more amenable to understanding and working with contexts for the knowledge era emerge, so does the reawakening of the ideas grounded in the work from the Human Relations Movement.

Schwartz (2007) also argued that human energies come from “four main wellsprings in human beings: the body, emotions, mind, and spirit” (p. 64). This conception provides a useful lens for otherwise invisible soft skills and motivations now considered part of contemporary leadership development and practice in higher education. It brings together ideas such as: knowledge workers bringing their ‘whole selves’ to work (HBR, 2008); leadership and followership as embodied experiences (Ladkin, 2012; Sinclair, 2007); that energies are entwined with the central and unifying role that ‘purpose’ plays within knowledge-intensive institutions (Bennis, 1988; Chaleff, 2009; Follett, 1933; Greenleaf, 1977). It follows therefore that leadership as practice (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010; Kennedy et al., 2013; Raelin, 2016a; Raelin, 2016b) is a complex, shared and relational endeavour (see for example, Bolden *et al.*, 2015; Davis, 2015; Fletcher & Kaeufer, 2003; Gronn, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Energy management is also of

continuing interest to social psychologists, where there is ongoing work in the field to inform contemporary leadership studies. For example, Ryan and Deci (2008) find that:

The depletion of human energy and vitality has long been a focus of interest in psychology, and recent works in social psychology has reinforced the idea that social and motivational variables can affect the depletion process. Less well understood is how people catalyze or gain energy (p. 713).

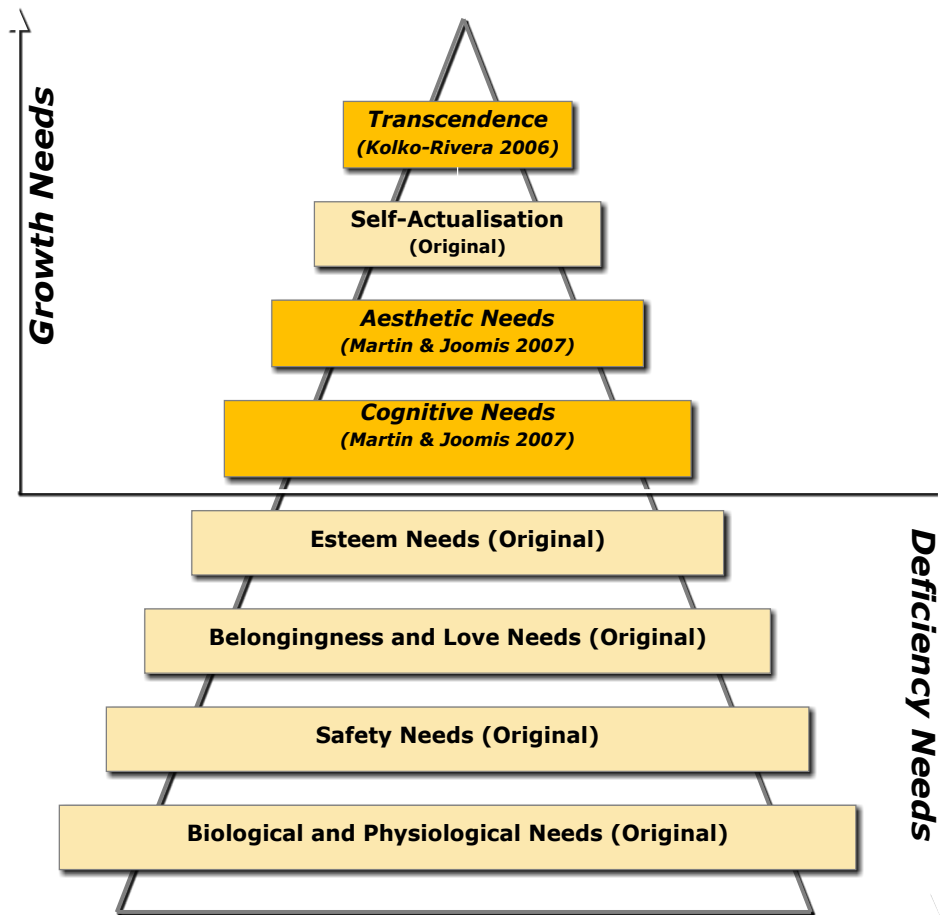
Motivating Factors for Knowledge Work

Given that motivations are directly connected to the wellsprings of energy that Schwartz (2007) described and that motivations for work have been connected to management theory from at least the time of McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Y, it is timely to explore needs and motivational drivers for professional staff work in higher education today.

Expanding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

This chapter is informed by a framework from a study that investigated leadership and knowledge work in higher education (Davis, 2012). The framework shown in Figure 1 brings Maslow's original hierarchy of needs (1943; Maslow, 1970) into conversation with later works of Martin and Joomis (2007) and Koltko-Rivera (2006) to produce an expanded hierarchy of needs and motivations for the 21st century. Here Maslow's original pyramid has been expanded by the addition of three extra levels and the delineation between deficiency and growth needs: Martin and Joomis (2007) added two levels congruent with knowledge work as mentioned by Raelin (2016b) make sense of their contexts and environments and "choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome" (p. 3) that of cognitive and aesthetic needs, as well as the line to identify where motivations shift from *deficiency* needs to energising *growth* needs. The four levels noted as deficiency needs in Figure 1 are named because their lack produces the necessary motivation to meet them, often by depleting our energies in the process. The four levels noted as growth needs, on the other hand, tend to energise people when they are pursued. Koltko-Rivera's (2006) contribution reacquaints readers to Maslow's original, albeit often omitted, level of self-transcendence as the highest order at the top of the pyramid.

Figure 1: Expanded Hierarchy of Needs



Whilst acknowledging some disagreement between scholars who see Maslow's theory as relying on needs being met in strict order from the lowest to the highest levels, Maslow himself is recorded as being less dogmatic about the order:

The weight of evidence now available seems to me to indicate that the only sound and fundamental basis on which any classification of motivational life may be constructed is that of the fundamental goals or needs, rather than on any listing of drives in the ordinary sense of instigation (Maslow, 1970, p. 26).

The elements themselves remain generally accepted in many disciplines and are widely known in management practice (see for example, Beck & Cowan, 1996; Hall & Thompson, 1980; Harris, 2005; Wilber, 2008). Further, given that "work motivation is one of the major topics in organizational behavior, not many work motivation surveys exist" (Gagné et al., 2010, p. 628) this is a useful concept to explore professional staff motivations in the case study to follow.

Illustrative Case: Professional Staff Energies and Motivations

This case draws upon the contexts for professional staff work as outlined so far in the chapter and brings these into conversation with findings about motivating factors for professional staff work. These findings were part of a wider qualitative study that explored challenges of higher education leadership and management for professional staff in universities (Davis, 2012). This interpretive inquiry built five themes which emerged from a critical review of the contextual literatures relevant for leadership for knowledge-intensive work in the early 21st century, and named these as Wordly, Sustaining, Leadingful, Relational and Learningful Leadership Literacies for the Knowledge Era. These were positioned as a ‘speculative typology’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 2) and empirically tested for their signs of *theorisation* and *experience* in the field. The inquiry used a ‘between-methods’ version of a multi-methods triangulation strategy (Denzin, 1977, p. 302) in that the two methods used were both analysed qualitatively. The first method was a thematic analysis seeking signs of *theorisation* of the five leadership within extant data relating to Australian higher education published in the period 2008-2011. The second method, and where the case study for this chapter is drawn, was a qualitative survey of 226 professional staff working in Australian universities which served to explore whether signs of these five leadership literacies could be seen as being *experienced* in practice.

The case given in this chapter is drawn from data only regarding the ‘sustaining’ leadership literacy gathered as part of the second method, from professional staff working in universities in Australia. A brief sketch of respondents as shown in Table 1 provides detail about this cohort.

Table 1: Profile of Professional Staff participants of the study

Invitations to participate were sent to professional staff and members of the Association of Tertiary Education Management (ATEM). Of the 800 invitations extended 226 respondents completed the survey.

Gender breakdown show that 75% of respondents were female which corresponded with ATEM's membership gender profile and is also indicative of the broader distribution of professional staff in the sector, where 65% of the 52,850 staff were female (DEEWR, 2010 Table 1.7). Despite only contributing at the rate of 25% of overall respondents, males nevertheless accounted for 61% of the executive level participants, which is indicative of gender representations at senior leadership levels in Australian universities (Blackmore, 2009, p. 73).

The respondents were well credentialed, with 90% completing an undergraduate degree level, and of these 4% held doctorates and 35% Masters degrees.

When considered by role level, Executive staff made accounted for 10% of respondents and General Managers 20% of the total. Managers were the largest representative grouping, contributing 47%, followed by Administrators at 22%, and 'other' at 1%.

Ages were classified according to generational periods by birth year range, The largest grouping identifying as Baby Boomers (1944-1965); Gen X (1966-1980) were 34% of respondents. A very small numbers of Gen Y (1981-2000) at 2% took part and one respondent identified as part of the 'Builder' generation (1922-1943).

Respondents were employed in all of the university type groupings as defined by the Australian Education Network classification which include Australian Technology Network (ATN) at 17% of respondents; Group of Eight (Go8) at 27%; Innovative Research Universities (IRU) at 14%; New Generation Universities (NGU) at 17%; and 25% of respondents worked in universities unaligned (UU) with these groupings at the time of the study.

In order to ensure anonymity of participants, ranges rather than specific data given for age, role levels and university names were collected. Further, where direct quotes are provided, pseudonyms are used to reflect the gender and role level of the respondent (for example, Ann is an Administrator, Greg is a General Manager).

These details show that respondents were largely heterogeneous in that some held formal leadership positions and some had informal leadership roles and most managed staff. All would likely fit knowledge worker descriptors. Some held executive leadership roles and many were situated in the spaces where engagement with students and other stakeholders occurred and where policy, leadership, management and resourcing decisions were sharply felt. Such heterogeneity secured a data set from a diverse range of staff, which allowed the findings to

build a broad picture of experiences of leadership and work of professional staff in Australian universities.

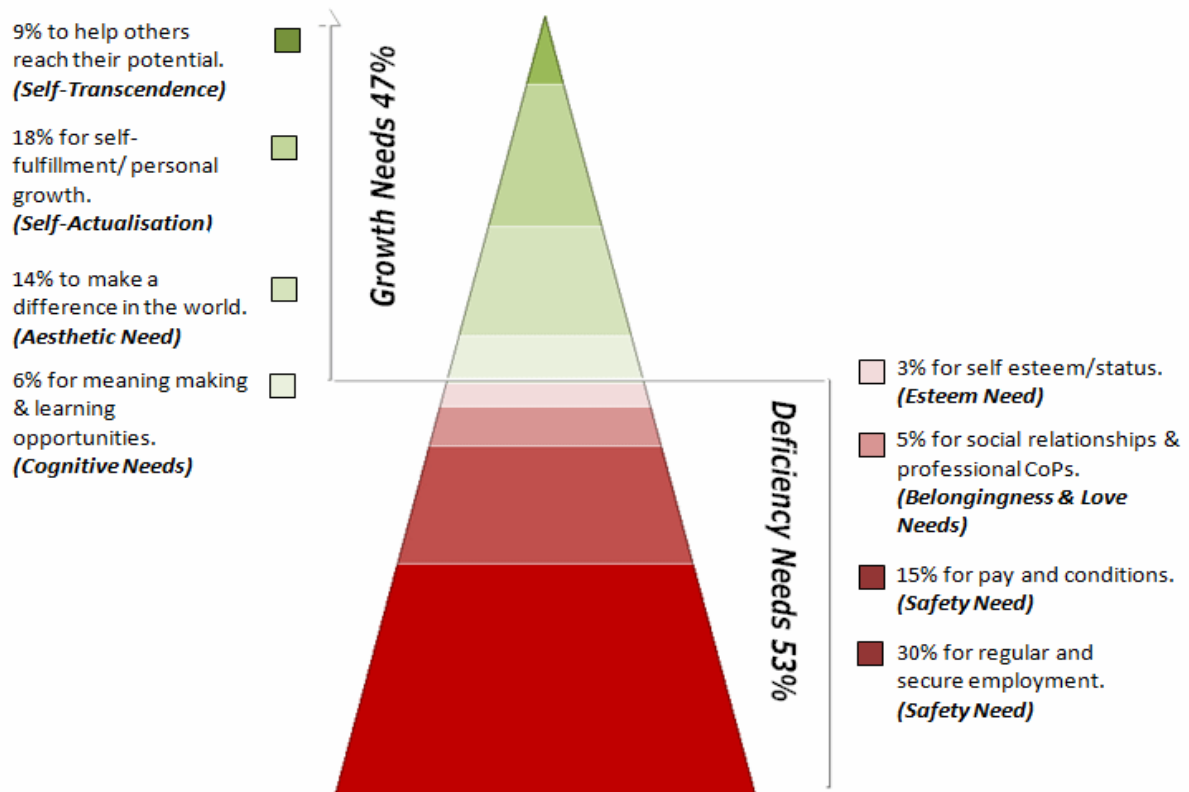
Motivations for Work by Professional Staff in Australia

Of specific interest for this chapter are the findings from the *key motivating drivers bringing respondents to work* part of the study. Respondents chose one answer that best captured their motivation for work from options that included: *regular and secure employment, pay and conditions, social relationships and professional communities of practice; self-esteem/status; meaning making and learning opportunities; to make a difference in the world; for self-fulfilment/personal growth; or, to help others reach their potential.*

These responses were then mapped against the particular motivational driver as shown in figure 1 of motivational needs that could reasonably be addressed within the workplace (the first deficiency need, Biological and Physiological shown in Figure 1 was not included in the analysis as it was assumed that such ‘survival’ needs were a reasonable pre-condition for work). Figure 2 shows the results with the theorised need in brackets next to the results and the line drawn at the point where the needs turn from deficiency to growth needs.

Figure 2: Motivational Drivers that Brought Respondents to Work

Q. When you think about what brings you to work, what is the key motivating driver?



The findings show that more than half of the responses fell into the ‘deficiency needs’ and that the majority of those were at the lowest order ‘safety needs’ (i.e. regular and secure employment and pay and conditions). When analysed further, the choice for safety needs did not vary much when viewed by role level, gender, age range or university grouping. **Martha**, for example, cited regular and secure employment as her key motivation for coming to work, and succinctly articulated the pressures and likely consequences:

We seem to be working longer and longer hours—I regularly work a 50+ week and also work on the weekend. Most of my colleagues are in similar positions, this situation will increasingly take a toll on our health, work productivity and organizational sustainability. However, what can we do about it? (**Martha**, Baby Boomer, Go8 Manager).

As the responses tagged as deficiency needs account for 53% of all responses for this question, it does raise concerns about the capacity and appetite for necessary depth of learning needed to fuel

a service innovation agenda needed to work with complex, turbulent and fast moving contexts of higher education management work today. These are serious concerns for the sector because motivations associated with growth needs are the ones that positively motivate and energise staff in ways to drive creativity and innovation.

As well as the motivating factors specifically addressed at Figure 2, two questions related to lived experiences of work and leadership are indicators for sustainable levels of energy management, and therefore useful to this discussion. Both directly relate to Schwartz's (2007) indicators of body and emotions as wellsprings of energy management and may serve to illustrate why the majority of needs shown in Figure 2 were shown in the deficiency needs:

- First, whilst the majority of respondents were also long serving higher education sector staff, (37% of respondents reporting their length of service in the sector as between 11-20 years, 26% having 6-10 years of service and 16% having more than 20 years in the sector) they also reported their time in current roles to be relatively short. 20% of respondents reported being in their current role for less than twelve months, 34% between 1-2 years, and 25% for between 3-5 years. This means that half of the respondents had been in their present role for two years or less, and 75% of staff in their role for five years or less;
- Second, when asked *how many hours did you work last week?* 91% of respondents indicated that they worked more than the hours they were paid. Of these, 35% of respondents indicated that they had worked moderately more; 18% many more and 7% significantly more (in the survey, these distinctions were given as slightly more (1-10%), moderately more (11-20%), many more (21-35%), and significantly more (+35%). These results did not change significantly when further analysed by administrative, manager, general manager or executive level roles, or when sliced by gender, age group or university grouping.

There was a strong sense from respondents that working more than hours paid was culturally accepted and normalised within their institution. For example, General Managers **Gary** (Gen X, Go8) reported *‘too much to do but that is what happens at the top’*, **Glenda** (Baby Boomer Jones, NGU) described this as *‘a cultural expectation that you work long hours to get the job done’* and **Glenn** (Baby boomer, IRU General Manager) felt that *‘too many competing demands; impossible deadlines and requests to satisfy bureaucratic accountability’* resulted in many more hours work every week than he was paid for. **Michael**, a Manager, who reported working significantly more than the hours he was paid for, epitomises the complexities underlying these issues:

It is not unreasonable to expect that staff in senior positions to work more than the standard working day—indeed it is necessary for the health of divisions and the overall institution. The workload at senior level, however, has extended beyond that which might be reasonably expected, and there is a tendency for this to also ‘trickle down’ to less senior levels. Staff are paid relatively well (particularly at the lower end of the HEW scale at entry level) however there are increasing stresses that may limit our ability to retain key staff (**Michael**, Gen X, Go8 Manager).

Although only 9% of respondents did work their normal allocation of hours, others reported that they were content to work more than the normal hour allocation in exchange for more flexible work arrangements. **Annette** (Baby Boomer, Go8 Administrator), worked moderately more hours than was paid for reflected that she *‘worked flexi-time which enables me to work longer hours to keep up with my workload and take time off when needed’*. **Miriam** (Baby Boomer, UU Manager) reported that she worked slightly more hours than she was paid yet *‘workload is not an issue for me currently as I have a high degree of autonomy and with this comes flexibility so if I put in a few extra hours I am happy to do this in exchange for this work option’*.

These work patterns are a concern for long term sustainability of individuals and indeed the sector given that knowledge workers are not fungible labour. Indeed, the ‘dots’ discussed in this chapter are elements that reside inside the head—soft skills, relationships, networks etc.—and

important, if invisible, components of knowledge work. Further, professional staff are not as easy to replace as workers seen as a ‘pair of hands’ may have been on the factory floor in the industrial era so. If energies and motivations continue to remain at largely deficiency levels we are likely to lose experienced and networked knowledge workers due to burn out or to other sectors that are more attuned to supporting this kind of work.

This case brings these often invisible issues into focus. The challenge remains for the Australian higher education sector, institutions and leaders to do more to align with “skilful management of energy, individually and organizationally” as argued for by Loehr and Schwartz (2003, p. 5).

Connecting the dots between motivation, energy management and contemporary leadership studies

Encouraging conversations about mindsets rather than just skillsets will connect the dots between otherwise hard to identify (and measure) elements such as motivation and energy management and the socially complex fields of leadership and management. More expansive and holistic mindsets amenable to working with complexity and uncertainty are needed but these are incommensurate with the mindsets that served so well in the industrial era. Knowledge era mindsets are attuned to frames of mind that can realistically and humanely address complexities of work undertaken by professional staff in higher education.

Further to the case shown in this chapter, a focus on motivations for knowledge work in higher education has been addressed more recently: as part of the annual Times Higher Education’s Workplace Survey (Grove, 2016) and through the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education’s Motivating and Developing Leaders’ report (Peters & Ryan, 2015). Both reports found that intrinsic factors (which can be mapped to growth needs in Figure 1) were important for motivating higher education staff:

...a number of key factors that are important for motivating staff in their day-to-day jobs; many of the same factors play an important role in motivating individuals to take on leadership responsibilities. A central theme to emerge is the importance of intrinsic motivation, and in particular having opportunities to learn and grow (in many cases through challenging and interesting work) (Peters & Ryan, 2015, p. 18).

From a theoretical perspective, Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Gagné *et al.*, 2010) is emerging as a useful meta-theory for the study of human motivation and learning, which in turn illuminates the critical role that soft skills play in knowledge work. SDT focuses on three basic psychological needs: *autonomy*, *competence*, and *relatedness*. Indeed, Gagne and Deci (2005) argue that work climates that attend to these three areas are likely to enhance intrinsic motivation for employees that may yield these six important work outcomes:

1. persistence and maintained behaviour change;
2. effective performance (particularly for creativity, cognitive flexibility and conceptual understanding);
3. job satisfaction;
4. positive work-related attitudes
5. organizational citizenship behaviours; and
6. psychological adjustment and well-being (p. 337).

Therefore, attention towards staff motivations and work related psychological needs provide opportunities to learn and grow and resonate with Raelin's (2016a) earlier stated premise that "given the chance and the time to get their confidence back, [employees] wish to participate in the enterprise through their own collective practices" (p. 124).

In consideration of leadership and management development for professional staff in higher education attention to 'thriving' as well as the 'T-Shaped Professional Practice' draws all of the elements discussed in this chapter together, both address key markers of vitality and learning in particular as areas to pay attention to. Both concepts align well with and surface the mostly invisible elements of Self Determination Theory (SDT) as areas to pay attention to so to develop the necessary mindsets and skillsets needed to work with uncertain and turbulent conditions that underpin higher education management work today. Thriving at work, as argued by Spreitzer *et al.* (2012) is where vitality and learning are gauges and the key markers:

like a thermometer, this thriving gauge can help individuals understand if they are overheating (with a propensity for burning out) or too cold (indicating stagnation and depletion). By paying attention to one's sense of vitality and learning, individuals have a mechanism to assess the sustainability of their work (p. 155).

Learning and connecting to one's vitality play their part in earlier mentioned T-shaped professional skills that pay attention to both deep disciplinary, professional and technical knowledge (the vertical part of the T) and our boundary crossing capacities variously described as soft skills, enterprise skills and boundary crossing expertise (the horizontal part of the T).

Conclusion

The challenge remains in preparing ourselves, our staff and our institutions for the likely disruptions and significant changes the sector is facing. Connecting dots between leadership, energy management and motivation are worthy of attention now. This chapter outlined the benefits when considering the elements that were the 'dots' and the contexts that make it necessary to connect them in this way.

Looking forward then, attention to the art, practice and research for leadership by and for professional staff in higher education requires a shift in development focus “from the ‘self’ to taking responsibility for the ‘self-in-relation’ to others” (Bolden *et al.*, 2015, p. 31) and one achievable way to do this is encourage a critical reflective profession practice (Davis & Moon, 2013).

Looking back as we eye the future, it is also possible to see that Mary Parker Follett considered these ideas nearly a century ago. Join me to marvel at her grasp of ways to engage with the kinds of challenges we are now facing. It appears that she was a person ahead of her time—is she ahead of ours?

Whoever connects me with the hidden springs of all life, whoever increases the sense of life in me is my leader (Follett, 1928, p. 294).

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