

# CHALLENGES IN REPOSITIONING A BUSINESS SCHOOL: A REFLECTIVE DISCOURSE

**Anesh Maniraj Singh**

University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
Graduate School of Business & Leadership, South Africa

## **Abstract**

The role of the Dean of a business school draws a fine line between being a chief executive officer and being a chief academic officer. Some business schools are run as businesses that sell education whereas others are run as academic departments that educate business leaders. Whichever viewpoint is taken, teaching and learning are keys to the success of a business school. However, equally important is the role of the Dean in leading a school towards the fulfilment of its goals. Managing a business school requires a leader who is a strong academic, an entrepreneur, a counsellor, a politician, a communicator, a visionary and a strategic decision maker. Business schools while serving the business community, need to be focused on the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

This paper uses a reflective discourse to trace the author's journey as a former head of a business school and the challenges that he faced in steering the school towards the achievement of its strategic goals. The main lessons that emanate from this paper is that business school Deans must remain true to themselves, they must acknowledge that they are human and that they are never too old to learn.

**Keywords:** managing business schools, challenges, qualities of business school Deans, dilemmas faced by business school Deans, reflective discourse

## **Introduction**

Business schools the world over are facing new challenges in terms of how they define themselves, how they relate to their stakeholders and how they develop and maintain relationships with their parent institutions. Control of business schools

range from centralised control, to semi-autonomous control, to fully autonomous self-directed strategic business units. The levels of control impact on the Deans/Directors/heads of business schools, and how they manage, and provide direction for their schools. Emanating from the control relationship is the issue of balancing of priorities of the parent university and priorities of the school. This paper examines the challenges faced by business schools and business school Deans in balancing the various priorities and needs of the schools numerous stakeholders. The paper will take a reflective discourse approach. According to Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2000) reflection is about interpreting one's own beliefs and practices within the context of the perspectives of others, and to subject one's own assumptions to critical review. The purpose of this paper is to understand the challenges faced by the author, the actions that he took and reflections on what could be improved in future. This paper will critically examine existing literature on business school management which will be expanded upon with examples and reflections from the author's own experiences as a former head of a business school. For the purposes of this paper, the term Dean will be used to mean head of school, head of department, discipline chair or school director.

### **Overview of academic leadership**

Historically, academic leadership has been seen as a voluntary act of making oneself available to lead and direct departments or faculties within universities and institutions of higher education (Jones & Holdaway, 1996). The first line manager is position has often been a rotating position which everyone who qualified, due to seniority, would have to hold as part of their commitment to the institution whether it was a part of their career aspirations or not (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). This according to Moxley& Olson (1990 cited in Jones & Holdaway, 1996) meant that academic leaders needed to possess skills over and above their academic discipline. Furthermore, they had to perform tasks which were more closely linked to the tasks of a coprorate business manager. Being a rotating position, academic leaders are conflicted between maintaining collegiality and enforcing productivity as they would have to return to their substantive academic positions once their term of office ended(Rowley & Sherman, 2003). For those academic leaders who

favour corporate managerialism over academic collegiality, re-integrating as an academic could prove difficult. Therefore, more democratic academic leaders tending to favour academics within the school could compromise on institutional requirements. It is clear from this argument that exercising power and deciding whether to side with management or academics “in a collaborative collegial context is fraught with conflicting expectations” (Jones & Holdaway, 1996). However, Bennet (1990 cited in Jones & Holdaway, 1996) believe that department heads are indispensable as they are expected to operationalise the vision and mission of the institution and to ensure that the academic goals and expectations of the institution are met. Based on Bennet’s argument it would be appropriate for institutions to entrust first line managers with the authority to make decisions as they deem fit. Furthermore, academic heads should be allowed the flexibility to manage their units and the unit staff in a manner that ensures that the institutional goals are met. According to Bryman (2007 cited in Thomas & Thomas, 2011), “academics prefer a minimalist leadership style – not overt dictatorship”. Empowering academic leaders to lead as they deem fit would result in a balanced approach to management that would protect academic freedom and at the same time ensure goal achievement. In most South African universities, the academic heads of departments were chosen on the basis of election and not selection. However, with the drive to become globally competitive and to meet accreditation requirements, academic heads are now selected through proper recruitment processes in order to appoint the best person for the job. The position of the academic head is now viewed as a “professional” management position. With the breaking of geographic boundaries and easier mobility of students, most universities are attempting to attract foreign students. Furthermore, with the growth in innovation, universities are commercialising academic intellectual property into an additional stream of income for the institution. This means that academic managers need to be more than teachers and researchers; they need to be strategic thinkers (Davies & Thomas, 2009). According to Fejgin, et al., (2008), academic leaders “need to be aware of wider organizational perspectives, to learn management strategies and to acquire managing tools.” While “traditional” academics are having to become professional managers, the expectations of Deans of business schools are different.

## **The role of business school Deans**

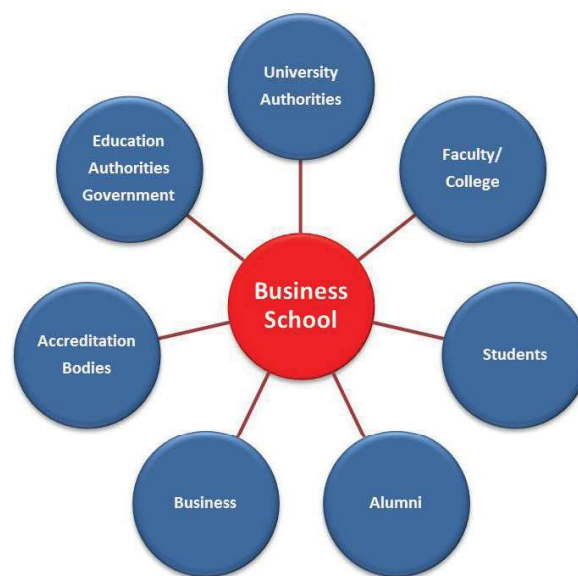
According to Starkey & Tempest (2008) modern business schools are “valued more for their managerial expertise, cash generation abilities, and financial strength than their intellectual strength and scholarship”. Therefore, the business school Deanship constitutes a “profession in its own right”(Starkey & Tiratsoo 2007, p.55 cited in Davies & Thomas, 2009). They state further that the position requires unique and specialised skills and relies heavily on financial performance. As such, business school Deans are required to perform the role of chief executive officer (of a business) rather than serving as the chief academic officer (of an academic school). The academic legitimacy of business schools is being called into question due to the perceived shift in roles of the school and the Dean (Thomas & Thomas, 2011). However, while there is a profit motive for the existence of some business schools, they are still academic departments which are expected to ensure that quality teaching and learning take place. The South African Business Schools Association (SABSA) (2012) states in its mission that “... this sharing of knowledge is aimed at improving the overall quality of business education on an ongoing basis.” This sentiment is also echoed in the mission of Harvard Business School, one of the world’s leading business schools “We educate leaders who make a difference in the world. For more than a century, our faculty have drawn on their passion for teaching ...”. It is evident from these two mission statements that business schools exist to educate and to teach. The Dean has to maintain a balance between academic and administrative duties (Jones & Holdaway, 1996). While their assertion holds true for Deans of academic departments, the Dean of a business school has to balance multiple roles such as chief academic officer, chief executive officer, entrepreneur, and scholar (Davies & Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, they have to manage research, innovation, quality, meet accreditation standards and develop and maintain external networks, while steering the school and inevitably the broader institution towards the achievement of its goals and objectives (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). In effect business school Deans could be seen as “superdeans”. However, such a sentiment would be challenged most vociferously by Deans of other schools and scholars in science, arts, and the humanities who question the

legitimacy of the business school as a serious academic discipline (Nussbaum, 1997 cited in Thomas & Thomas, 2011).

It is evident from the foregoing that business school Deans have to manage many challenges of which satisfying multiple stakeholders is a challenge worthy of discussion on its own.

### **Managing multiple stakeholders**

It is evident from the works previously cited that a business school has to satisfy many stakeholders (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Business school stakeholders

It is evident from Figure 1 that a business school needs to work closely with the parent university and its authorities in order to access funds, deliver on the institution’s mandate and to meet the quality standards of the institution. This relationship according to Allison & Zelikow (1999 cited in Thomas & Thomas, 2011) is often a bureaucratic relationship which requires the Dean to play strategic political “games”. The business school is often seen as the university “cash cow” (Thomas & Thomas, 2011). In such situations, the bureaucracy is sometimes relaxed. Business schools that fall into a college or faculty structure

need to manage relationships and the onerous bureaucratic processes resulting from these additional structures. Students, both existing and prospective, expect the best faculty and high quality facilities (Davies & Thomas, 2009). Similarly, they expect timely and professional academic and administrative support which adds to the complexities of managing a business school. Alumni are probably the best advocates and ambassadors of a school. They need to be kept close to the school and encouraged to make favourable statements about the school and attract donor funding to ensure the schools continued growth. Business determines the curriculum and support of a business schools programmes as such events that are relevant and value adding are necessary to maintain their interest in and support of the school. Accreditation bodies place major demands on business schools to, firstly, obtain the accreditation and, then, to maintain or enhance their accreditation status. Government education authorities might not interact directly with a business school. However, their agendas are driven indirectly via the parent university structures. In South Africa the Council on Higher Education (CHE), (2005) accredited nineteen MBA programmes offered by universities and private business schools. The accreditation process was managed through each of the universities structures. For schools that obtained conditional accreditation, the heads of those schools had to report annually to the CHE via their Vice Chancellors' offices.

It is evident that a business school Dean has to manage a number of stakeholders. However, his/her responsibilities don't end there. There are numerous other challenges which business school Deans need to manage including: curriculum development, research, executive education, network management, brand building, time management and team leadership.

### **Challenges faced by business school Deans**

Due to the paucity of literature on business school management, this section will focus on the dilemmas faced by business school Deans based on the work of Harris (2006) and Davies & Thomas, (2009) (Table 1). The author will also share his insights regarding these dilemmas, reported in the first person.

**Table 1** Dilemmas faced by business school Deans

Dilemma	Author
Administrator v. Leader Time inside v. Time outside Research excellence v. Curriculum Innovation	Harris (2006)
Publications v. Practitioner demands Investing in Buildings v. New professors Students as customers v. Co-producers Internal committees v. External enterprise Personal research v. School brand building	Davies & Thomas (2009)

It is evident from Table 1 that a business school Dean is faced with many choices which lead to a dilemma as to which option is of greater importance. What must be emphasised is that in business schools which operate closely within the parent university's system, the Dean has to decide between satisfying the university needs versus satisfying the school's needs. Harris (2006) identified what he termed the "three critical dilemmas". While every leader is expected to perform some administrative duties, they shouldn't be such that they distract him/her from leading their team. Depending on the type of institution, Deans are sometimes required to write lengthy motivations for mundane requests as opposed to using that time more profitably in providing strategic direction for their colleagues and their schools. A particular incident experienced by the author revolved around the filling of positions. Three posts were vacant, they needed to be filled budgets were available, but, detailed motivations were required regarding the reason for filling the posts. That time could have been better utilised to head hunt suitable candidates. Similarly, nine administrative staff were employed on revolving fixed term contracts which at the time, based on Union warnings, constituted an unfair labour practice. Nevertheless, the author was expected by the human resources division to motivate for the conversion of those staff to permanent positions, which resulted in having to readvertise the posts and then conduct a credentialing process to make them permanent. Many productive days were lost complying with these requirements.

Time inside versus time outside is always a dilemma for a business school Dean. I was often conflicted with such a choice. Staff, students and colleagues wanted to see me, they needed my decisions, my signature on documents and the reassurance that someone was in charge. However, as a figurehead, I had also to be seen socialising and networking with influential business associates, clients and even government officials in order to build the brand and to attract new business. Balancing these responsibilities needed regular planning and adjusting of my diary. Towards the end of my term of office I became more visible at my school and less visible in public.

Research excellence versus curriculum innovation is what often leads to conflict between business school academics and the parent institution. The business school research productivity has always been under scrutiny by university officials. Our institution has one of the best research reward systems in the country, but the business school academics were simply not interested in leveraging it. A personal dilemma for me was that when I assumed headship of the Graduate School of Business, it only had one product on offer, the MBA. Being a marketer, I believed that we needed more products to take to the market and hence invested my energy in developing new programme offerings such as the Management Development Programme, Project Management for New Project Managers, Finance for Non-financial Managers, among others. These programmes were flexible, had flexible entry requirements and were relevant to industry. Davies & Thomas (2009) have identified publications versus practitioner demands as one dilemma which I believe is the same as research excellence (publications) versus curriculum innovation (practitioner demands) as proposed by Harris (2006). I had to prioritise curriculum innovations at the expense of personal publications in order to create a school that offered relevant products which satisfied industry training needs.

Investing in buildings versus investing in professors. The salary scales at my institution were fixed which didn't allow much leeway for negotiating salaries outside the scales. This hampered the selection of candidates who earned more in other institutions. The anomaly in the system is that there is an annual capital expenditure budget allocated to the school which is expected to be spent on



fixtures, furniture, renovations and maintenance only. If the budgets were flexible, the unspent capital expenditure could have been reallocated to subvent the salaries budget. However, university policy and procedure prevailed.

A major challenge I experienced was trying to convince students that they needed to be co-producers of knowledge and contribute to the research output of the school. The attitude of students is that they came to business school to obtain a qualification. They did a research dissertation as one of the requirements. The conversion of the dissertation to a publishable paper did not interest the student as they had met their academic commitments and needed to move on.

A major source of frustration was getting short courses and other learning programmes approved. In order for a short course to be approved, a template comprising fourty questions needed to be completed. The templates needed to be checked by an official at the quality promotion unit, changes needed to be made and then the document had to go to a minimum of three committees before a course could be approved and run. On average it took eight months for a course to reach the market. In the interim, competitor business schools were offering the same courses in our city.

In terms of our university policy a head of school only serves two terms of office. However, due to a reconfiguration of the university in 2011, I was eligible to apply to be appointed as the Dean and head of the school. I was unsuccessful on the basis that my research productivity did not meet the university norm. Admittedly, I sacrificed my own productivity in the interests of my school. In the year preceding my appointment I produced five journal articles and two conference papers. During the five years as head of school I produced on average one paper per year. However, it must be emphasised that I turned around a school that was ranked in 11<sup>th</sup> position to 5<sup>th</sup> position in the country and I created a brand that earned the school the Top Brand in the province in 2011.

While this discussion has focused on the dilemmas identified by Harris (2006), and Davies & Thomas (2009), there are other unique challenges that I faced which I will merely list in order to focus on the qualities of business school Deans. Some unique challenges which I faced as head of the Graduate School of Business

included: a relatively small complement of suitably qualified permanent academic staff (four in total of whom only two held PhD's), a shrinking budget, limited autonomy, no budget for marketing, no links with business, nine administrative staff, all of whom were employed on fixed term contracts, a library with many empty shelves, a faculty board that was unsupportive of innovative ideas in the early days, and I was not the preferred candidate for the post. [In order to meet the challenges/dilemmas faced by a business school Deans requires special skills].

### **Skills required by business school Deans**

As previously mentioned, at the very least, academic leaders need to possess the academic qualifications and knowledge to teach and conduct research within the discipline. All academic leaders should be able to perform the generic leadership tasks of planning, leading, organising and controlling (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). According to Simon (1976 cited in Rowley & Sherman, 2003) academic leaders must be able to translate goals and objectives into measurable achievements. Communication, strategic thinking and decision making are important skills for all business school Deans (Bareham, 2004). The core outcome of business school programmes is for students to be able to communicate effectively, think strategically and to make decisions; the business school Dean, therefore, should be proficient at performing these tasks in a manner that it is visible and can be emulated by staff and students alike. Senge (1990, pp.341-353) suggested that “a leader needs to be a visionary, a designer, a steward and a teacher”. Excellent business school Deans are visionaries who can take their schools beyond the ordinary, they are able to translate those visions into designs that can take shape in reality, they are able to look after their people (staff and students) and, most importantly, they can teach. An excellent example of a business school Dean who fits this description is Professor Dipak Jain of Insead who humbly stated in his own words in 2010 that he is just an “ordinary teacher of marketing”, yet he heads the world's 4<sup>th</sup> ranked business school which has campuses in three countries.

What hasn't been explored in this paper is that personality, charisma, tenacity, networking ability, empathy, a sense of humor, a passion for people and most importantly humility are the trademarks of excellent leaders of any organisation.

These are equally important for business school Deans (Davies & Thomas, 2009). Rowley & Sherman (2003) also emphasised the importance of trust. Trust like respect cannot be demanded, it needs to be earned. Rowley & Sherman have said that good leaders take responsibility for failures and ownership of their decisions.

## **Reflections**

I have tried to keep my personal experiences separate from the literature wherever possible. However, it is important to link my own experiences with the literature as well in order to highlight my mistakes and shortcomings and to find ways of improving and helping others who read this paper to learn from these experiences. Contrary to the statement by Rowley & Sherman (2003), I have always had aspirations to be an academic leader. I believe that as a holder of an MBA and having had corporate management experience I would be able to make a difference as an academic leader. However, while it was this combination of skills that secured me the position, changes in the institution's research trajectory worked against me continuing as Dean.

As a leader I believed that I had to represent the views and complaints of my colleagues which I did on numerous occasions. This, however, was perceived as a weakness in that I "fought other people's battles". My biggest weakness as the head of the business school is that I felt I was obliged to constantly prove myself as being worthy of my job. As mentioned earlier, I wasn't the preferred candidate for the post at the outset.

As mentioned by Thomas & Thomas (2011), business schools are seen as cash cows. When I applied for the position of head of school, I identified opportunities for making money for the school without having to ask for donor funding. My greatest challenge was getting endorsement to convert my ideas into reality, I was constantly reminded that the business school was an academic school and academic matters should be my focus. Nevertheless, at the end of my two terms in office, I left the school with a healthy, positive cash balance.

In terms of the university policy, a head of school is not expected to teach and should take a light supervision load in order to focus on running the school. When one

of my colleagues left unexpectedly, I decided to take over his teaching load which also meant that I had to perform the assessment tasks as well. I am a passionate teacher much like academics at Harvard. When our dissertation throughput slowed down I initially took on seven dissertation students to supervise, the next year I took seventeen and last year (2011) I took on thirty. I felt that besides setting an example for my colleagues, I was serving my students (which is my natural calling). My extra efforts, while appreciated by my students, took their toll on my physical well being.

Now that I have had an opportunity to reflect, I ask what I will do differently the next time. Perhaps one thing I would do differently is acknowledge that I am not superman, and as such I wouldn't go out of my way to prove my competence. However, I am true to my nature and that is to put others before me, which I don't believe I can or will change. While I possess the business skills to manage a business, I feel that I have a lot to learn in managing an academic business and as such I have embarked on studies to formally learn those skills and to improve what I have learnt on the job.

## **Conclusion**

Running a business school does require a superdean at the helm. However, even business school Deans are human and as such they need to take on responsibilities that are value adding and can only be performed by the Dean. Those tasks which can be delegated should be delegated to people who can deliver on their mandate. It is vital that deans of business schools make the right political contacts within the institution, within industry and even within government and political circles. However, they should never compromise their beliefs and values by playing political games for personal gain. If being politically correct helps the school, the students and society, then by all means one should leverage one's political contacts. There is one thing that this journey has taught me academic leaders must become lifelong learners in order to possess the latest skills and knowledge so that they may be better at what they do. I am not too old nor too educated to learn.

## References

- Alvesson, M. & Sköldbberg, K., 2000. *Reflexive Methodology—new vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Bareham, J., 2004. The leadership and management of business schools. [Online] Available at: [www.brighton.ac.uk/bbs/research/papers/wh\\_bareham04web.pdf](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/bbs/research/papers/wh_bareham04web.pdf) [Accessed 15 September 2012].
- Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2005. CHE (HEQC) MBA Review. [Online] Available at: <http://www.che.ac.za/documents/d000096/> [Accessed 25 September 2012].
- Davies, J. & Thomas, H., 2009. What do business school Deans do? Insights from a UK study.. *Management Decision*, 47(9), pp. 1396-1419.
- Fejgin, N., Avissar, G. & Kedem, Y., 2008. Effects of an academic management development program on participants. *Review of Business Research* , 8(5), pp. 96-106.
- Harris, S. E., 2006. Transitions: dilemmas of leadership. *New Directions for Higher Education*, Volume 134, pp. 79-86.
- Harvard Business School, 2012. Mission. [Online] Available at: <http://www.hbs.edu/about/> [Accessed 29 September 2012].
- Jones, D. R. & Holdaway, E. A., 1996. Post-Secondary department heads: expectations for academic leadership and authority. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 10(3), pp. 10-20.
- Rowley, D. J. & Sherman, H., 2003. The special challenges of academic leadership. *Management Decision*, 41(10), pp. 1058-1063.
- Senge, P., 1990. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation..* NewYork: Double Day.
- South African Business Schools Association (SABSA), 2012. About Us. [Online] Available at: [http://www.sabsa.co.za/page/about\\_us/index.html](http://www.sabsa.co.za/page/about_us/index.html) [Accessed 29 September 2012].
- Thomas, H. & Thomas, L., 2011. Perspectives on leadership in business schools. *Journal of Management Development*, 30(5), pp. 526-540.

\*\*\*