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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

How to lead a university: a beginner's guide

5 March 2015 | By David Eastwood, Ruth Farwell, Paul Webley, Paul Curran | Page 1 of 5

Vice-chancellors discuss their role and offer advice to aspiring university leaders



Source: Rex/Getty

Orchestral manoeuvres in the spotlight

The complexity of leadership lies not in elaborating multiple themes, but in complex orchestration. As with sonata form, repeat your central themes

Think of a vice-chancellorship as a symphony in four movements.

The first movement begins with a structural challenge. Do you start with a long introduction or launch into the main themes? Many vice-chancellors start with a long introduction. They announce that they will spend time listening and learning. Listening and learning are important, but universities have their rhythms and the external environment has its own tempo, and these need to be understood. We live in a world of allegros, where the pace is fast. Listening and learning should be leitmotifs of a vice-chancellorship. Start by elaborating major themes that will be developed.

Most classical sonata-form movements have two principal themes; some (those of Bruckner, for example) use three. Remember this. Universities are complex places and so the principal themes should be few, clear and amenable to development. The complexity of university leadership lies not in elaborating multiple themes, but in complex orchestration. Vice-chancellors have multiple audiences that need to understand those central themes, so, as with sonata form, repeat them.

We then move to the development section. Our worlds are ever-changing and our key themes (the student experience, research challenges, how we relate to wider political cultures and economic imperatives, how we shape the societies we serve) need to evolve.

The development section of the sonata form often turns fragments into great building blocks, sometimes by focusing on the previously unnoticed. University leadership and strategy can be like that. The climax of the development section can show how fragments can be brought together, how we can triumph against adversity, how dissonance can give way to harmony. Remember this, especially when dissonance seems to dominate.

We come then to the recapitulation, where themes return, transformed, sometimes more richly harmonised, yet recognisably the same; reminding us that strategies give direction, can be elaborated, and can shape the great arch of a finely wrought and forward-moving structure.

Next, usually, is the slow movement. A moment to reflect, to reconsider, to muse, sometimes to lament, yet often to find the moments of greatest profundity. It is a myth that all symphonic slow movements are slow – adagios of ineffable calm or great tragedy. Brahms rarely wrote a real slow movement, Beethoven often didn't. You choose. You may keep the pace moving with an andante, or you may need that time of reflection, of deep searching, and an adagio is appropriate.

There are times in university leadership when deep reflection and soul-searching are needed. Leaders should not shy away from this, nor should they see it as a weakness. Directions need to change, when events confound the course that has been charted, or when strategy falters. Reflect, regroup, rethink, and move on. Harmony and a perfect cadence can follow.

Then we come to the third movement. A change of mood. It defines your style. Do you want a scherzo or a minuet? Do you want to joke or to dance, and will your humour, if that's what you choose, be teasing, at your own expense, or a gruff joke about the world? I don't jest here. Being a vice-chancellor is about being human, about moments of lightness, about showing something of yourself.

Often, vice-chancellors say that the job is lonely, even isolated. Responsibility has its solitary moments, but universities are communities and vice-chancellors part of those communities. Collegiality, friendship and intellectual engagement are as critical to being an effective vice-chancellor as the arts of management, whatever they may be. So a scherzo or a minuet is not a moment of light-heartedness but a moment of humanity, of sheer enjoyment in the great quest to be a university.

And so to the finale. Finales are difficult, and often symphonies fall short here. Some, of course, never finish, perhaps because, as with Schubert's 8th symphony, other projects call them away; perhaps, as with Bruckner's 9th and Mahler's 10th, because an end comes, and others then try to complete what's been begun. The parallels here are obvious.

Some vice-chancellorships skip into a jolly presto when a job seems done. Some strive for a great climax, and end with a glorious research excellence framework result or a triumphant fundraising campaign. Some literally build their way to a climax. Some end in failure, even tragedy, when, as in Tchaikovsky's 6th, it isn't quite clear when the funereal music has stopped. There's something important here. Being a vice-chancellor is enormously challenging.

Not all meet that challenge, some for reasons of personal failing, and some through the truly awesome nature of challenges that, expectedly, confront them. Failure is sometimes a personal tragedy, occasionally a self-immolation, often an institutional calamity. Avoiding failure is about getting the first movement right. Elaborating, developing, listening, reworking, reflecting and finding a rich harmony between leadership and what the university aspires to be.

Then, of course, there are miracles, such as Mozart's Symphony No 41, where, in a supreme moment, six themes that were seemingly unrelated come together in a climax of complexity and virtuosity. Don't aspire to this. Vice-chancellors, in my experience, are talented, some hugely so, but Mozart was a genius. Nevertheless, it shows what might be done, how all those strands make a university what it is, and how apparently different ideas and activities can be brought together and sound as one.

If you ever achieve it as Mozart did, and if everything you've done comes together in a triumphant climax, my advice would be to retire just then!

David Eastwood has been vice-chancellor of the University of Birmingham since 2009. His former posts include the vice-chancellorship of the University of East Anglia.

Readers' comments (2)

- [Clive Boddy \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/clive-boddy/2049713.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/clive-boddy/2049713.publicprofile) | 05 Mar 2015 8:18pm

Setting a good example and leading from the front is also important in gaining the respect of those you would ask to follow you. For example, never take a pay rise that's greater than the average for other academics at your institution. To make a good impression announce that you are taking a pay cut on your first day in the new job because you think vice-chancellor salaries have been over-inflated. Set up a doctoral bursary with the money saved. Get out amongst your staff and students and discover for yourself what their concerns and accomplishments are.



- [Anna Notaro \(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/anna-notaro/2000433.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/anna-notaro/2000433.publicprofile) | 06 Mar 2015 1:04pm

Aciknowledge that universities have a gender problem and do something about it, as suggested in this blog post "50 shades of sexism in the academy" <https://universitydiary.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/50-shades-of-sexism-in-the-academy/>