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How do University Deans accept the Reform Goals of their Faculties? An Empirical Analysis of the Influences on Deans' Goal Acceptance concerning Reform Goals in German Universities.

Abstract

Recent organizational changes within German universities have also had an impact on the position of academics who are involved in the management and guidance of departments or faculties. Especially the position of the dean has undergone fundamental changes. Through legislative reforms, responsibilities that are consistent with functional conceptions of leadership (see Fleishman et al., 1991) were added to a position that used to be a mainly representative and collegial one. Traditional conceptions of the dean as representative of his/her colleagues are declining, and new ideas of a dean as manager and leader are on the rise. In line with such conceptions, the current function of a dean is to ensure the adaption of his or her faculty to the overall policy of the university. But, although deans are provided with a bundle of new competencies such as financial freedom and the right to make personnel decisions on their own, the position still remains anchored in the old tradition of collegiality and representation, which shows for instance in the involvement of the colleagues in the appointment of a dean, in the temporally limited time on the job and a close informal dependence on either the fellow professorial colleagues or on the central management board of the university.

Both processes, the strengthening of the dean's position and the liabilities to the old tradition of a collegial university, are very compelling for those who become deans. On the one hand they have to assume managerial and entrepreneurial tasks; on the other hand they must be careful not to violate the traditional values of the special organization they are working in. If somebody wants to gain deeper insight into how universities cope with the twofold processes of new managerialism and old humanistic traditions, it therefore seems intriguing to pose the question how deans cope with everyday work between those two poles.

Given these fundamental considerations, the starting point for this study was the following research question: what influences can be seen on the self-understanding of deans with regard to their new role as a management and leadership person? In order to gain insights into this question, a survey was conducted with $n = 54$ deans (out of which $n = 3$ were female) at eight German universities. In addition, nine interviews were conducted with participants of the survey. As indicator for how good deans feel about their new role of a so-called "middle manager" (Hanft, 2001; Mintzberg, 1983) participants were asked about their acceptance of the goals and changes that were going on in their faculties at the time of the study. These 'reform-goals' can be seen as a central instrument in the implementation of strategic organizational change at German universities. A model was developed to describe possible influences on the goal-acceptance of deans, which was based on suggestions by Hollenbeck and Klein (1987) and Locke, Latham, and Erez (1988). It comprised psychological constructs as well as specific framework-dimensions consistent with theories on the special organization of universities. This model was tested with Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) procedures using the survey data. The interviews were content-analyzed after Mayring (2002) and then used as additional source of information for the interpretation of the findings from SEM.

Results show that reform-goals get most positively rated by those deans who are both willing to accept the strategic goal setting by the university's steering core, and at the same time are actively searching for ways and means to put these goals into practice in accordance with the needs of their faculties. When doing so those deans feel a certain distance towards their professorial colleagues, which shows

in lower rates on the dimension of collaboration in the survey. This finding can be interpreted in a way that the respective deans are accepting the new role of a manager and leader, since this role requires unpopular decisions which result in a feeling of distance towards their peers. Nonetheless, all deans accept reform-goals better, if they have the feeling that their colleagues and other relevant persons accept them as well. Additionally goals are better accepted the longer a dean holds this position. This finding gives evidence for the assumption that participation in setting and realizing goals enhances their acceptance. In accordance with this, deans who are doing their jobs longer see more possibilities to put given goals into practice. On the other hand the acceptance of strategic decisions by the central management of the university seems to decrease with job duration of a dean.

According to the data, there is no evidence for the influence of age, academic discipline or professional experience outside the university (in enterprises, in the administration or in non-universitarian research) on the individual acceptance of goals by the deans. Nonetheless the time spent on extra-universitarian jobs has a positive effect on a dean accepting the strategic goals set by presidents, vice-presidents or other relevant persons within the central management of the university, probably because a person who has worked outside the university is used to rather hierarchical structures and is more willing to accept them even within the university.

Recommendations from the results of this study follow a twofold approach: Concerning the strategic management of a university it seems extremely important that goals and changes are developed participatively, which means that the process of developing and implementing the goals should enclose all relevant groups of actors within the faculty (i. e. deans, vice-deans, colleagues, administration and students). On the individual level it seems important to provide deans with possibilities for a network of support with each other or with professional coaches or supervisors. This strategy might counterbalance the lack of collegiality with the other professors in the faculty, which comes along with the new role as manager and leader in German universities.

Keywords: Deans, goals, goal acceptance, goal setting, leadership, management, administration, university