“Organized Anarchy”: The Enduring Paradigm of University Management

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Pressed by relentless demand for accountability, dogged by serious legal, financial and administrative concerns, guided by legitimate reasons to remove ‘academic dead wood’, misguided by naïve and simplistic views, as well as driven by sinister motives, higher education management and leadership in many countries are fast assuming characters of ‘unadulterated’ corporate and business models. What many call, the ‘corporatization’ of higher education, the practice is increasingly running the risk of turning institutions from an open space of ‘scholar-ship’ to a market place of ‘business-ship’.

What is the fuss all about, one may ponder, with the wholesale adoption of business and corporate principles in the world of higher education—if it serves the purpose? Cohen and March, two of the leading organizational theorists articulated higher education as organized anarchy and attributed a “garbage can model” to describe it. These and many other organizational theorists and higher education experts extensively explicated on the unique nature of higher education as an organizational body with competing interests, objectives and outcomes which thus make it inappropriate, even disastrous, to foist—wholesome—cultures, values and practices from other organizations—for a number of reasons.

This article identifies a number of contrasting aspects between academic institutions and business/corporate organizations so as to make a well-informed decision in adopting and implementing those cultures, values and practices.

Contrasting Aspects

**Aspect One—Profit factor:** First and foremost, higher education institutions are not in the business of profit making—the fundamental principle and guiding light of the corporate and business world. No matter how good the cause or product or service to humanity/society may be, if it is not perceived to be financially viable (read it as profit), it is simply a hard sell pursuing it—literally. This is by no means to say that institutions should not be generating resources to pursue their mission; in fact, in light of increasing financial straits, they should be encouraged and supported to do that.

**Aspect Two—Intangible output:** Knowledge creation and dissemination are not “tangible” activities and thus do not readily lend themselves to a meaningful and sensible measurement; this renders the capturing of output or outcome rather difficult. While, the developed world strives to validate meaningful and important higher education outcomes through well established, though still controversial, instruments (as ISI, impact factor, rankings), the relevance of these instruments for ‘developing countries’ is largely meaningless. Yet however, institutional leaders in the developing world increasingly pay tribute to these regimes regardless of their relevance or appropriateness to their needs or the inherent challenges and contradictions to their context and broader interests.

**Aspect Three—‘Binary’ structure:** Unlike the corporate and business world, the internal configuration of higher education institutions follows two parallel management regimes under one institutional roof—one governing academia and the other one the administrative staff. For instance, in the corporate world, employees could be relieved off their duties without much ado on a number of
accounts, such as personal traits, skills in team play; but, in the world of academia this is largely hard to achieve as long as one remains academically ‘active’.

Establishing a career path, enhancing team play, planning succession, personal development, coaching, just to mention a few, are some of the pervasive corporate traits, which are increasingly creeping into higher education. There is little doubt that these qualities are of relevance and importance to members of the non-academic community; the problem arises when these are foisted wholesome without due consideration and understanding of the dynamics of the two different and parallel management regimes in a higher education institution.

Indeed, Business Process Management (BPR) or Open Performance Review and Appraisal System (OPRAS) or Talent Management (TM) or Succession Plan (SP) may make sense for members of the institutions who are not academics. But attempting to impose these processes, as for instance, talent management in its crude form in the most talented corner of society, i.e., academic institutions, sits rather uneasily, if not inappropriately.

**Aspect Four—Academic freedom:** Unlike the corporate world where conformity is mandatory, academia, supposedly protected by academic freedom, should fear neither intimidation nor harassment, nor, even worse, firing, by their institutions for their non-conformist ideals, values, perspectives, positions, beliefs, and statements. The requisite prerogative—academic freedom—is not that compatible with the principles of business and corporate regimes.

**Aspect Five—External factors:** Unlike those in the parallel administrative track, the critical elements for academic promotion in higher education institutions do not necessarily reside in the institution itself. Academics are promoted primarily on the account of their intellectual output as predominantly recognized and established by external entities—such as peers, journals, scholarly societies, and so forth. This external factor, while it empowers the academics, it constrains the reach of institutional managers.

**Aspect Six—Allegiance:** Academic staff is widely known to pay its allegiance to their discipline, not necessarily their institution nor even their departments nor units. Academics are known to congregate around “invisible colleges” woven by interest in academic pursuit and intellectual curiosity. It may be important to add that academics thus tend to identify more with their profession than their institution.

**The urge to manage**

Simply put, institutions loathe uncertainty, unpredictability and chaos—what higher education institutions are considered to be all about. One may count the number of students admitted and enrolled, but little could be said about the quality of learning; one could talk about the staff student ratio, but it is hard to say what the quality of teaching is like; one may also count the number of research output but it is hard to determine its quality or impact on teaching, learning, research, or society. These elusive traits drive many to “effectively” manage these institutions, in the process turning them into increasingly poorly managed knowledge citadels. Instead of managing institutions within the realm of these well identified uncertainty and complexity, institutions are striving to control them—with considerable consequence to a host of stakeholders.

It may be simplistically deduced that, in academia, it is not just about conformity, but as much creativity; it is not about convergence of opinions and perspectives but rather their divergence; it is
not about team playing, but rather individual success and action; it is not just about cooperation, but also competition; it is not about building capacity, but rather a developed capacity; it is not about developing a nebulous career path, but attaining a clearly defined academic track of time immemorial.

It is not that lessons cannot be learned from the corporate and business world in terms of managing and leading increasingly large and complex organizations as universities have become. For instance, in my university, some 250 policies govern the institution! Out of control enrolments, growing financial straits, increasing public accountability, legal and fiduciary responsibilities necessitate embracing a new form of leadership and management regimes responsive to these inherent and new forms of, academic, institutional, national and international phenomenon. Thus applicable lessons and practices could be drawn from the corporate and business world to help manage these expanding bureaucracies—as per their missions and aspirations.

**Conclusion**

The hot pursuit of managerialism akin to corporate world, and more so mechanically without regard to autonomy or academic freedom or understanding the complex culture have serious implications on the efficiency, productivity, engagement, enthusiasm, and moral of the central pillar of higher education institutions—the academic staff. Without a fully engaged and enthused academic community, building academic excellence, strong culture of scholarship and professional commitment may remain elusive. In the competitive global economy where knowledge reigns supreme, it is prudent to ensure that the knowledge workers—the academics—are given more, not less, leadership leverage, managerial space, nurturing environment, and academic freedom.

On the other hand, academia, its leaders and other powerful stakeholders need to engage constructively in addressing each other’s concerns, needs and interests in the pursuit of the mission of the university in the 21st century. Institutional managers and leaders, and equally so academics, need to realize that striking the right balance in managing an institution is an inevitable shared responsibility—and duty. This realization could be effected, among others, through a creation of a dedicated fora as well as training opportunities in leadership and management in higher education.

Higher education institutions will be doing a huge disservice to all if they relentlessly drive corporate principles of leadership and management on the chaotic and unique landscape of higher education. Numerous failed travails which wasted huge amount of time, energy and money need to be deterrents to imposing such a model in its totality on higher education institutions known to operate as ‘organized anarchy’.

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