Conflicting Priorities: the dichotomous roles of leadership and management at TVET colleges

Catherine A Robertson, Stellenbosch University

The matter of leadership versus management has been debated since the 1970s and although these debates have remained unresolved (Bass & Stodgill, 1990; Bush, 2007), some distinctions have been made. The main distinction seems to be that a leader is someone who is visionary, inspires followers and has a special obligation to change an organisation's direction and culture, while a manager's work is more task-orientated and operational and concentrates on fulfilling general management functions, like financial or human resource management, amongst many others (Bass & Stodgill, 1990; Tichy & Devanna, 1985; Callan, 2001). Callan (2001:10) suggests that while management is involved with dealing with 'complexity and the present', leadership is concerned with the establishment of a 'compelling vision, direction and a plan for the future'. Tichy and Devanna (1985) contend that managers maintain the balance of operations in an organisation while leaders are characterised as individuals who create new approaches and imagine new areas to explore. Falk (2003:202) sums the distinction up as follows: '[D]esigning is a leadership function, while responding is a management function.' Yet, it also needs to be acknowledged that the two roles also seem to overlap functionally and have thus generally been used synonymously since a leader has to manage and a manager also has to lead (Bass & Stodgill, 1990; Morse, 2008; Van Wart, 2001).

The lines between leadership and management have become blurred since leadership happens at any level in the organisation. In Australia, leadership and management at its TAFE colleges have been recognised as different but overlapping concepts, mostly without distinguishing between the two in a practical sense (Foley & Conole, 2003). Managers in TAFE institutions who have responsibilities at different levels are regarded as having a leadership role which is similar to the South African situation. Falk (2003:196) claims that those 'labelled "leaders" are also required to manage'. This view is consistent with the one taken in the South African TVET college context.

This evident lack of clearly demarcated roles creates competing priorities which have implications for any leadership or management development initiative. These dichotomous roles can be divided into five broad, sometimes overlapping, categories which require a fine 'balancing act' on the part of the leader to maintain (Collinson and Collinson (2009:376):

- Operating across different sectors

- Dealing with a diverse demography of students;

- Balancing internal and external roles;

- Dealing with various competing operational pressures; and

- Facing external pressures.

These categories provide a useful basis for considering the dichotomous relationship of competing priorities of leadership and management in the South African TVET sector. In addition, these leaders also have to negotiate their relatively recent integration into the higher education sector that has brought about additional challenges and demands (DHET, 2013).

1. Firstly, TVET colleges are complex institutions which <u>operate across different sectors</u>. Since the TVET colleges are located as post-school education and training institutions in the South African public higher education system, the leader of a TVET college is first and foremost an educational leader, but with a multi-faceted vocational rather than a purely academic focus. This means that TVET colleges, like other VET institutions internationally, operate across sectors other than focusing on a purely educational system. Colleges have to work with business, the community and government. Each sector has its own requirements and challenges (Gleeson & Knights, 2008). The ability to balance all these sectors' diverse needs may be a unique challenge to the leadership of the colleges, especially given the current financial pressures they face. Colleges therefore require leaders who have a number of different competencies that can be applied in different contexts and complex situations.

2. At any stage, a TVET college has a <u>diverse demographic of learners</u>, all at different life stages and with different educational needs and levels. TVET colleges offer a wide range of education and training opportunities to post-school students, providing them with a second chance of finishing the final school-leaving certificate, or by offering bridging programmes providing access to universities. The colleges also offer a range of vocational programmes for school leavers to enter the job market. In addition, colleges provide upskilling and reskilling for working or adult learners, as well as providing contextually relevant and personally enriching learning possibilities to local communities (HESA PSE, 2011). Furthermore, a significant proportion of the students are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Collinson & Collinson, 2009; RSA, 2013). This is not only relevant in South Africa but also other countries.

   Having such a diverse student body complicates education and training at these institutions. Other factors relate to including a variety of teaching methods such as

online learning, as well as timetabling that accommodates flexible learning in terms of time and place. The challenge is how to balance these multiple missions and functions in order to meet the needs of the individual, the community, and the state. Leaders must therefore be responsive to these multiple needs, as well as college learners' aspirations and limitations (Eddy, 2010).

3. Leaders at these colleges have to balance an <u>internal and an external role</u>. While internally, leaders are heads of the colleges, meeting the needs of staff and students, as well as reporting to the Board, they are also the face of the college externally. There are government mandates that have to be met and the leader needs to play an increasingly visible role outside the college, meeting businessmen and captains of industry and forming partnerships in order to ensure work placement for the college's learners as well as needing to make contact with possible funders. Despite these demands, the external role of the college leader should not be at the cost of internal college matters.

4. Leaders have to deal with various <u>competing operational pressures</u>. Public higher education is increasingly required to provide evidence of its effectiveness during times where educational leaders' work is dominated by management matters rather than efforts to improve teaching and learning (Dempster, 2009). Foley and Conole (2003) and Callan *et al.* (2007) have identified similar tensions in the TAFE sector. There is an increased call for accountability at a number of different college levels such as use of resources, human, physical, financial and otherwise.

    Since these leaders have to try to deal with various competing operational pressures owing to the complexity of their environment, they have become reactive (rather than proactive), balancing the administrative aspects of their roles with the educational aspects (Robertson, 2005, p. 45). Many leaders feel that they are 'middle managers implementing, at the behest of others, policies for which they feel no ownership' (Robertson, 2005, p. 45). Choices have to be made between 'business strategy and education, national policy and local reality, entrepreneurship and accountability, managerialism and professionalism' (Callan et al., 2007, p. 10) to avoid tension. These leaders lament the fact that they have had to become experts in fiscal and human resource management, public relations, collective bargaining and politics for which few are trained or experienced (Robertson, 2005). Lambert (2013) suggests that it is these practices that are in danger of undermining the purpose of education.

5. Finally, leaders also have to face <u>external pressures</u>. Lambert (2013, p. 39) refers to external pressures such as a nationally imposed funding methodology and increases in

inspection and audit requiring specialist managers like 'directors of finance, quality and performance to lead these institutions in this new environment'. Collinson and Collinson (2009, p. 374) claim that the FE colleges in the UK have become 'over-regulated' and that the many targets and audits that govern their operations have now become 'excessive and counter-productive', many of the targets being either 'unrealistic, inconsistent and/or contradictory'.

To be a leader at a TVET college in South Africa and elsewhere today is thus not an easy task. Since TVET colleges have been placed in the spotlight, the panacea of all our economic woes, these leaders are expected to play a transformative role in education. The growing need for responsiveness and flexibility in the TVET sector has not only increased the workload of leaders in this sector, but has resulted in a number of leadership challenges.

Lambert (2013, p. 41) thus acknowledges that the role of the vocational college leader has evolved significantly from a 'chief academic officer' to one that combines the academic responsibility with that of being the business executive. He adds that this dichotomous role of leadership and management is a clash between 'student-centred pedagogic culture' and 'the managerial culture of managers'. Leaders need to 'combine educational leadership qualities with both generic organisational leadership qualities and strong business and commercial capabilities' (Foley & Conole, 2003, p. 10). There is now a need for leaders with broader skills, vocational competence and pedagogic knowledge, to replace the traditional educational leaders (Collinson & Collinson, 2009, p. 376; Eddy, 2010, p. 3). These leaders are expected to be flexible on the one hand but, on the other, they have to deal with 'multiple, shifting and sometimes contradictory (auditing) pressures in which colleges operate'. The way in which these leaders have to negotiate both policy and practical issues with their multiple stakeholders often has to depend on tacit knowledge (Collinson & Collinson, 2009, p. 53) rather than on training as to how to approach these issues effectively.

Competing priorities cause many TVET leaders to become frustrated by the perpetual changes they perceive in national education policies. Leaders are distracted from the core purpose of their work, which is to improve teaching and learning in vocational colleges (Gleeson & Knights, 2008). To meet all the challenges leaders face in this sector today, leaders need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, aptitudes and competencies to lead these institutions into the future, as required by the White Paper (RSA, 2013).

Leaders at South African TVET colleges hail from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds – ranging from school teaching to artisanal trades. Very few of them have any specific vocational education or context-specific leadership training, yet they are expected to function in a complex and demanding sector marked by regular policy changes and political interference, student unrest, unstable staffing conditions and no clear leadership career pathways or succession planning strategies. Despite these challenges, TVET leaders remain at the helm of an essential (though often undervalued) component of the South African national education system.

In this new, complex sector, there is a need for new knowledge, new skills and new aptitudes to run these multi-million rand operations. Generally they have to rely on tacit knowledge to do the job. Research has shown that leaders are not born to the task. They need to be developed to become visionary and transformational. They need to learn how to work with people and they need to develop critical negotiation skills. They need to learn how to cope with operational pressure.

Countries like Australia, Britain and the United States address all these issues through planned leadership development in their respective vocational sectors, but this has not been the case in South Africa. No specific, custom-designed leadership training programme for TVET college leaders exists in South Africa, even though the need for such a programme has been identified by two Green Papers (RSA, 1998; RSA, 2012). This need, however, has not been actioned in the White Paper for post-school education and training (RSA, 2013).

Callan et al. (2007) advocate leadership development as an investment since it not only provides necessary knowledge and skills to leaders to assist the organisation with achieving its strategic intentions, but improved capability and learning on the part of leaders bring about positive change and innovation. If leaders know the difference between management and leadership, they should be able to avoid micromanaging and concentrate more on leading.

Management and leadership development is ideally a deliberate and planned activity which is driven by strategic and organisational objectives. The reasons why deliberate strategies for leadership development have become necessary are, firstly, succession planning as it has been reported that many leaders in the VET sector internationally are nearing retirement age (Shults, 2001; Eddy, 2010; Simon & Bonnici, 2011; Sullivan & Palmer, 2014). Secondly, there should be career paths for leaders in the VET sector with specific training programmes aimed at developing leaders at every level. Thirdly, it is imperative to continuously identify the

necessary skills and capabilities required by leaders in the complex vocational environment for leadership development programmes to remain current.

Yet, most leadership training programmes in the vocational sector are often fragmentary and of short duration, with considerable duplication, offered on an ad hoc basis and not forming part of a longer strategic developmental goal or strategy at a policy level, even though the need has been recognised (Falk, 2003; Foley & Conole, 2004; Callan et al., 2007). The consequence is that these courses are ineffective in changing attitudes or behaviours.

Internationally, there has been a turnaround strategy for vocational leadership development. The word 'leadership' is now included in educational development organisations in New Zealand, the USA, Australia and the UK. In Australia, a TAFE Leadership Scheme has been established, which provides the financial support for the planning and implementation of leadership development programmes. In the UK, there is a Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) which develops leaders in the vocational sector. The number of programmes and initiatives for developing leadership in the community college sector are too numerous to list in this paper. In South Africa, despite the Green Paper (2012) promising that a leadership training programme would be developed within three years, nothing has happened and this intention has been omitted from the White Paper (2013).

In the Draft National Plan for Post-school Education and Training (NPPSET) (2018), the word 'leadership' is only used when referring to universities. Quality development opportunities for staff, management and leadership staff and other professional staff that are directly involved with academic matters, is a key pillar of the university's capacity development programme. The Higher Education Leadership and Management Programme (HELMP) focuses on 'developing staff in leadership and management positions at universities' (p. 95). It is also mentioned that in order to steer institutions successfully, 'institutions need to develop leadership and management capacity at all levels' (p. 98).

Unfortunately, this is not the same for TVET college leaders who are referred to as 'management', as in 'staff development will also focus on the development of college councils, college management and college administrative staff' (p. 68). It also mentions that a 'key focus of capacitation of college management and governance structures is in understanding of enrolment planning and PQM (sic)' (p. 68). Attention has been given to ensuring that 'key management positions in colleges are filled' (p. 69). It is a strategy of DHET to develop a framework for continuous professional development (p. 68) (CPD) but it begs the question

whether this refers to CPD for managers of leaders. DHET acknowledges that they have little capacity to analyse the strategic plans that have to be submitted annually to the department and it is thus difficult to hold colleges accountable for these. Another strategy that was mentioned was to develop a capacity development framework for managers and councils in colleges. The word 'leadership' is not mentioned once in this context. It is difficult to understand how leaders in this sector, who are simply regarded as managers, will become the transformational leaders of the future as is expected of them. Naming is framing.

So, unlike the rest of the world, the South African TVET sector has no history of identifying, recruiting and training TVET college leaders. This is the real challenge. Leadership development in the sector needs to be identified as a national strategy and investment. It should be deliberate, planned and driven by strategic objectives. It should not be a collection of ad hoc policies, mandates or outcomes of crisis management. The programme should be custom-designed for national TVET colleges and not form part of other qualifications or become add-ons to other degrees, like the MBA or MPA meant for the business world and not education, nor imported from abroad. There should be long-term, regular instructional interaction and not once-off, in-service training with external training providers. The mode of delivery should also be tailored to the needs of the TVET leaders which could include experiential learning, including mentoring, job shadowing, internships and secondments.

With regard to a proposed curriculum framework for TVET college leader development, my research explored what broad categories should be covered according to current leaders of these colleges in South Africa – thus an insider's and not an outsider's view. I met with 71 leaders in the TVET sector nationally from seven provinces in the form of focus groups, which were followed by 15 one-on-one interviews. They confirmed a great deal of what has been mentioned above, namely that leaders at South African TVET colleges have lost sight of reforming and transforming the colleges in order to conform. Even though these leaders had specific views on how they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do, the distinction had become blurred in practice because of the competing priorities between leadership and management demands. The focus should have been on teaching and learning, yet it had shifted to operational matters and conforming to legislation.

These current leaders all supported the idea of strategically planned leadership development and believed it should be prioritised in the sector. In the focus group workshops, they decided that such a custom-made leadership training framework should cover the following broad categories, which, at the same time should lead to a qualification:

1. Legislation (which drives the system): college leaders need to understand the legislative process and how to implement the outcomes.

2. Communication skills (which drive the governance process): not only should college leaders communicate with external stakeholders, but they need to learn to communicate effectively with DHET, their employer, staff and other internal roleplayers like the SRC and the College Board.

3. Management skills (which are needed to run the college): leaders are not managers but they own the process and are accountable for the outcomes and need to know enough about the different operations to provide management support.

4. Leadership (which is required to transform TVET colleges): 21st Century leadership is transformational, shared and distributed.

5. Strategic and operational planning (which is necessary to lead the colleges into the future): college leaders must learn to be proactive and not reactive, forward-looking rather than backward-looking, systematic rather than haphazard.

6. Teaching and learning (which should be the unwavering focus of TVET leaders): a TVET college leader's sole reason for being is making teaching and learning happen.

In conclusion, if TVET colleges in South Africa are to rid themselves of the stigma of dysfunctionality (RSA, 2013) and if they wish to make TVET the public's first-choice post-school institution, they will need focussed and well-prepared leaders. This requires strategically planned, focused and customised leadership development.