1. Managing academics

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Managing Academics is a provocative and contestable title. For some academics, it evokes the legitimate notion (perspective) that academics need some formal structure or management otherwise they will be unable to agree, or attain, the goals of the organisation. For others, it may surface the occupational principle that academics, by virtue of their professional training and knowledge, have the requisite skills to self-regulate their own job performance and do not need any manager intervention (O’Neill and Meek, 1994). Indeed, whether you agree, disagree or are ambivalent to this title perhaps gives some important clues as to your own identity as an academic, and the values and beliefs you hold in respect to your role position, other academics and your organisation.

So why do values and beliefs matter? They matter because managing constitutes an active social process, and as such directly impacts the well-being and role performance of others (McGregor, 1960). In this text, the ‘others’ are principally academics in management and non-management roles, as well as other people inside and outside the organisation. Put simply, our perspectives of managing help us make sense of our organisational worlds by connecting the social activity of managing to our role positions within the formal structures and practices of the organisation (Weick, 2008).

In a sense, our perspectives of the world frame and colour the way we see other academics – as resources that need to be used up and maximised; as diverse individuals with complex needs that need accommodating; and/or some combination or ‘hybrid’ of the two perspectives. Essentially, our perspectives provide a fundamental link between our own identities (that is, how we view ourselves), our normative ideals of practice (that is, what we ought to do in a given position/role) and our patterns of behaviour (that is, what we actually do at work).1 In making these connections, our perspectives may act as a virtuous force for harmony and balance (to ourselves and others) or as a pernicious force...
for disharmony and conflict. To some degree, the choice is ours … it’s a question of perspective.

Managing in this text is viewed as a value-laden process of perspective taking designed to see the organisational world from “another’s point of view” (Parker, Atkins and Axtell, 2008, p. 149). As an active process of sensemaking (Weick, 2008), perspective taking recognises how managing is different when people take the time to strive for and accommodate different economic and social values and goals. To paraphrase Parker (2004), the process of doing management is something not fixed or final, but an active process of constructing different meanings to an identity or occupation as people “move through the day thinking, feeling, talking, [and] listening” (p. 47). This process of sensemaking challenges the unitary view that management is a value-free, functional process of managers dividing work up on the basis of shared interests and goals. Instead, emphasis is placed more on the fluid process of managers assigning meaning and labels (good and bad) to the varied and fragmented nature of managerial work and its constant time-consuming meetings and interruptions (Mintzberg, 1973).

To help understand the utility of perspective taking in organisations (Parker et al., 2008), academics in management roles are portrayed as value agents (Moosmayer, 2011). As value agents, academic-managers are seen as not merely reacting to events outside of their control, but as active thinking, feeling and intentional social actors reconstructing their social worlds to fit their own values and goal intentions. Although academic-managers may strive to be rational in applying various methods, techniques and metrics to achieve some given organisational goal or target, they “always manage as interpretive individuals, as people who are trying to make sense of things – and sometimes these things may be confusing, ambiguous, and puzzling” (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis, 2008, p. 9).

Before introducing the process of sensemaking, it is important to first examine the context for managing academics: the public university. Public universities present particular role and identity tensions for academics and managers alike given the inherent difficulty of integrating narrow economic functions and broader social-ethical goals into one organisation (McArthur, 2011).

1.2 CRISIS … WHAT CRISIS?

Successive waves of corporate reforms to higher education have taken their toll on the academy in public universities (Anderson, 2008; Deem,
Hillyard and Reed, 2008; Gonzales, Martinez and Ordu, 2014; Winter and O’Donohue, 2012). In the UK and Australia, the rise of academic capitalism characterised by an environment of neoliberal government reform, user-pays principles and increasing marketisation of higher education has produced forms of university work organisation that intensifies academic workloads and diminishes the professional autonomy of academics (National Tertiary Education Union [NTEU], 2015; Parr, 2015). In the “managerial university” (Anderson, 2008), academics may voice increasing levels of stress and feelings of betrayal and frustration at having to view universities as an “industry”, students as “customers”, courses as “products” and publications as “hits” (Furedi, 2011; Rolfe, 2013; Ryan, 2012; Winter and O’Donohue, 2012; Winter and Sarros, 2002b). It would seem significant numbers of academics find corporate reforms predicated solely on business-related values as somewhat alien to their own identities as professionals and/or discipline scholars.

For some academic-managers, crisis may represent a necessary and pragmatic response to a competitive situation that public universities find themselves in today: how to customise education and do research that generates funds given declining real levels of government funding and increasing student numbers in a post-public era (L. Parker, 2012, 2013). Under the guise of financial self-sufficiency, academics may feel pressured to do work that fits with narrow publications metrics (Willmott, 2011) and/or aligns with their institution’s attempts to “move more students through their programs at a faster pace” (Gonzales et al., 2014, p. 1106). Indeed, through a lens of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2009), these work pressures can be seen as positive signs of the university’s change strategy extending the enterprise model into academic’s daily lives. Without this “financial imperative” (L. Parker, 2013), academics will not assume a market-like identity and attribute their individual and career success to their own entrepreneurial virtues.

For academics with a strong sense of professional identity (Nixon, 1996, 1997), crisis is perhaps not too strong a word for what is occurring in public universities today. Indeed, some academics express the fear that corporate reforms represent a deliberate attempt to commodify higher education and reduce knowledge itself to narrow outcomes that can be exchanged for economic gain (Hussey and Smith, 2010; Willmott, 1995). For these academics, academic identity tension is a recurring issue given academic work redefined in narrow business terms ‘squeezes out’ broader liberal-social values such as discipline inquiry, scholarship, intellectual truth and knowledge that contributes to the wider community (Billot, 2010; Rolfe, 2013; Winter and O’Donohue, 2012). However, such
identity frustrations may not always be voiced or deployed in terms of an effective academic resistance strategy. According to Ryan (2012), Australian academics have adopted the characters of “zombies” – the living dead – as a possible means of coping with increasing audit and surveillance mechanisms, an acquiescent academic leadership and teaching large numbers of diverse, time-poor student cohorts.

1.3 HYBRID ORGANISATIONS

Exactly how (and if) academic role strain, identity tensions and “zombiedom” (Ryan, 2012) forms over time in public universities is still not fully known. Some scholars have pointed at the intractable problem of trying to work and manage in “hybrid” (Noordegraaf, 2007) or “multiple-identity” (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) environments where identities are not unitary and fixed but pluralistic and fluid. Managing other professionals in hybrid environments is particularly difficult given managers and professionals draw on two competing institutional logics, managerialism and professionalism, to construct their organisation’s identity and promote different definitions of institutional resources and core capabilities (Golden, Dukerich and Fabian, 2000). Understanding what represents ‘effective’, ‘meaningful’ or ‘legitimate’ work in hybrid organisations is particularly problematic given managers and professionals tend to identify more with their own subcultures rather than as members of the organisation (Johansen et al., 2015).

As multiple-identity organisations, public universities face real difficulties in trying to “graft a business culture onto a public sector and public interest oriented culture” (L. Parker, 2011, p. 440). Such difficulties have been exacerbated in recent years by New Public Management (NPM) government reforms that promise large-scale efficiency gains to public universities on the assumption “fuzzy” and “contested” service realities (Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 770) can be streamlined around more private modes of working, and governed solely on the basis of profit-making, customer responsiveness and efficiency criteria. However, NPM has led to different and adverse reactions to pressured professionalism in the managerial university. According to academics in business schools, NPM principles and practices have contributed to a more competitive work environment characterised by game playing (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Macdonald and Kam, 2007) and obscure research publications that lack meaning and substance (Corbett et al., 2014).

Making the task of managing more complex and ambiguous is the fact that managers and academics tend to engage in discourses that constitute
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a particular version of the social world (Deem and Brehony, 2005). Such discourses seem to play a key role in influencing perceptions of resource capabilities (L. Parker, 2012) and in shaping the role expectations of academics as managers, professionals and/or employees (Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Whitchurch, 2008). For example, in Brown and Humphreys’ (2006) study of a UK further education college, senior management defined the college as a business and conceived one teaching site as a “unit of resource to be managed” whilst lecturers “subscribed to a view of the college as an educational facility focally concerned with pedagogy [and teaching]” (p. 240). Clearly, finding ways to manage academics effectively in environments where values, goals and role expectations are challenged and contested is a difficult proposition.

1.4 MANAGING AND SENSEMAKING

The perspective(s) of managing that an academic-manager chooses to adopt will perhaps differ depending on how she/he makes ongoing sense of what they do, and why they do certain things, in a given role or work context (Ashforth, 2001). According to Karl Weick (1995, 2008), a seminal theorist of sensemaking, all work activities and relational practices are inextricably linked to the models, images and plans people use to rationalise and explain their worlds.

In the following sections, some key factors shaping the sensemaking process are discussed. These factors suggest that managing is a highly experiential process of making sense of a given situation – a process shaped by a manager’s own work ideologies, values, emotions and goal intentions – and bounded by the role expectations of others that have some voice in evaluating the manager’s performance (Fondas and Stewart, 1994).

1.4.1 Work Ideologies

Perspective taking is deeply connected to the work ideologies individuals construct to understand aspects of their employment, work, organisation and broader society. As “emotionalised, action-oriented beliefs”, work ideologies represent powerful mechanisms for guiding social action and helping individuals bind as an occupation or social group (Trice, 1993, p. 48). From a sociological perspective, perspective taking is not a politically neutral, value-free process. It is imbued with powerful ideologies and models of moral order for the maintenance of proper behaviour and the guidance of social action, including the proper distribution of
resources in organisations (Beyer, 1981). In this vein, perspective taking identifies the bases of political contention “among groups and individuals with different social positions and material interests” (Weiss and Miller, 1987, p. 108).4

Managing can be conceptualised as an employment–organisation relationship (EOR) (Shore and Coyle-Shapiro, 2003). As an exchange relationship, it is imbued with ideologies reflecting the emotionalised beliefs managers and employees hold in respect to what employees owe the organisation and what the organisation owes them in return (Geare, Edgar and McAndrew, 2006). Balance in the EOR is often associated with a unitarist employment ideology. Unitary theory is premised on the belief that a “basic harmony of purpose exists” between employees and employers such any apparent “demonstration to the contrary is due to the faults among the governed” (Fox, 1966, p. 5). A unitarist viewpoint sees no room for competing ideologies or conflict to exist in the workplace since organisations are thought to be governed legitimately by one perspective and source of managerial authority. In contrast, a pluralist employment ideology sees organisations as being made up of sectional groups, each pursuing their own perspectives and objectives which may coincide or may conflict (Fox, 1966). Importantly, a pluralist ideology assumes no inherent shared belief system or common perspective to exist in organisations. Instead, particular workplace policies and negotiation practices are seen as important mechanisms to balance the competing value demands and perspectives of employees and employers.

From a cognitive perspective, work ideologies can be conceptualised as “understandings that represent credible relationships between objects, properties and ideas” (Sproull, 1981, p. 204). Perspective taking depicted in this way tends to be a more benign activity in that it underplays the social-political nature of management and focuses more on the sets of norms and beliefs individuals use to construct their worlds and choose particular courses of action (Parker et al., 2008). The linking of beliefs and action “in terms of cause-and-effect relations” is an important function of ideologies as it makes it possible to determine how we expect people to behave in certain predictable ways (Beyer, 1981, p. 166). For example, the ideology of “student as consumer” (Furedi, 2011) may involve creating a structure or process that forms a bridge between the appeal of the new logic (for example, serve students as paying customers) and preserving legitimacy for this action (for example, in a user-pays system, academics must compete to provide greater satisfaction to student customers). Such bridges represent important ways to influence behaviour because it associates identification with a particular logic
(student as consumer) with its associated business practices (customer feedback evaluations).

1.4.2 Values

Values have special importance in perspective taking since they provoke conceptions of desirable behaviours and outcomes and constitute an important part of human identity (Gecas, 2000; Moosmayer, 2011). Values contain a strong judgemental element in that they carry a person’s ideas as to what is right, good or desirable in a particular situation. As relatively stable beliefs formed during early childhood, values are deep-seated and difficult to change. Values do have a strong motivational base to them and play a key role in moulding an individual’s behaviours throughout their life (Rokeach, 1973).

Ethical values and their associated philosophies attach importance to many aspects of education, learning, research and business enabling academics to develop sensitivity and judgement as to what is appropriate behaviour in a given situation. For example, a professor taking on a “social value agent role” may profess strong intentions to influence their students’ values by viewing education and social responsibility as a moral task (Moosmayer, 2011, pp. 52–53). Other professors may see themselves as “good citizens” and regard mentoring of early-career colleagues as a “moral obligation of the role” (Macfarlane, 2011a, p. 64). At the organisation level, universities and vice-chancellor committees may see tackling gender inequality as a morally intense issue worth solving (Kloot, 2004).

Although values exist within individuals, “groups of people often hold similar values, so we tend to ascribe these shared values to the team, department, organisation, profession or entire society” (McShane, Olekalns and Travaglione, 2010, p. 15). At the academic department level, shared values may be predicated on financial rewards such as market-pay loadings and incentives for high-ranking publications. Value congruence theory suggests the department will adjust better to the demands of a competitive higher education environment (that is, higher rates of publication, increased prestige/status, lower staff turnover) when the dean, head of department, professors and lecturing staff are motivated by similar financial incentives and see such rewards as congruent with their own personal value systems. More broadly, shared values such as universities are first and foremost places of student learning and scholarship may act as an important ‘glue’ that holds academics, managers, professional staff and the institution together (see Coady, 2000; Winter and O’Donohue, 2012).
Four values have been found to be especially important in shaping an individual’s preferences for particular forms of work and outcomes: achievement, concern for others, honesty and fairness (Meglino, Ravlin and Adkins, 1992). Although these values were developed from information obtained in the workplace, they have been shown to have resonance to people across national cultures. According to comprehensive research by Schwartz (1992), the human values of “self-enhancement” (pursuit of personal success and achievement, power and dominance over others) and “self-transcendence” (motivation to promote the welfare of others and nature) have universal appeal across countries irrespective of culture, gender and religion. Some individual values however may change as a society increases its levels of economic development. For example, younger employees professed desire to seek out jobs which provide for mentoring opportunities and appropriate work–life balance has been linked to increased leisure time, a function of a growing economy expanding opportunities for education, travel and flexible working hours (Salt, 2006).

1.4.3 Emotions

Emotions play a central role in our perceptions of events and issues around us. For example, we can tag positive or negative emotional markers to the same management announcement of a “possible merger with a rival university” corresponding to whether we see such information threatens (possible loss of job security) or supports (opportunity for greater research collaboration) our innate needs and drives. The key characteristics of emotions is that they are directed toward someone or something, generally only last seconds or a few minutes, and trigger in our minds a “state of readiness” (McShane et al., 2010, p. 122). Ultimately, emotions trigger our awareness of an impending threat or opportunity in our immediate work environment.

The degree to which academic-managers attach or detach themselves emotionally from managing others is an important question and will perhaps reveal itself more clearly in later discussions of perspective taking. However, it is worth making the point at this juncture that perspective taking is not just governed by our conscious reasoning (cognition). It is also influenced by our emotions and moods in the workplace (Ashkanasy, Zerbe and Härtel, 2002). When we emotionally thrive at work, we experience “both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 538). We feel a real sense of progress and momentum as events unfold in our lives. Alive to new opportunities that present themselves, we may openly express our research and
teaching interests and share our perspectives on current issues affecting our workplace (Dutton and Ragins, 2007). Conversely, when we feel we are languishing at work (that is, caught in a rut, failing to make progress) we often strive to protect what we have, and do not show much enthusiasm for connecting with others or activities we feel cannot ‘add value’ to our current situation. Languishing at work means we are more likely to express emotions of anxiety and depression (Keyes, 2002). These negative emotional responses are likely to ‘trump’ any innate desire to learn about ourselves and the environment around us.

1.4.4 Goal Intentions

Goal intentions refer to the evaluative processes by which an individual assigns meaning, value and purpose to implementing particular tasks or plans (Gollwitzer, 1999). Generally, people attach strong intentions to goals they would like to achieve during their lifetime (Rokeach, 1973). For example, an early-career academic may see the achievement of a PhD as the pinnacle of her career and may consequently only engage in PhD instrumental-related behaviour (writing daily, engaging in research methods courses, publishing papers) to achieve this end-state. In effect, a person with strong goal intentions has created a strong mental link between a future end-state (for example, becoming a tenure-track academic in this department) and intended goal-directed responses (cultivating strong personal relationships with the dean, professors, department colleagues). All other behaviour is then subordinated to this goal intention.

According to goal-setting theory, goal intentions represent a major source of work motivation (Locke and Latham, 2002). As “the immediate precursor of action” (Latham, 2007, p. 176), goal intentions direct attention to what needs to be done and the particular facts and information individuals need to act on. Goals that are specific, measurable, acceptable, relevant and timely (SMART) have been associated with a range of motivating behaviours at work (Locke and Latham, 2002). In short, goals have the effect of directing our attention and action (choice), mobilising effort, prolonging effort over time (persistence) and motivating us to develop perspectives (cognition) for goal attainment.

Studies of faculty values framed within an economic and competitive context suggest individual academic’s goal intentions will differ according to the extent they show identifications to the organisation, to students, to the discipline, or to broader social referents of higher education (Churchman and King, 2009; Levin, 2006; Winter and O’Donohue, 2012). Academic-managers who seek to align themselves with the
demands of a corporate enterprise may well voice goal intentions based on economic gain, the primacy of the market and the minimisation of cost (Deem and Brehony, 2005; L. Parker, 2012). Academic-managers who see themselves primarily as professional educators may frame other goal intentions such as “personal and cognitive development of students or the social advancement of their society” (Levin, 2006, p. 84). Some managers may be able to combine economic and social goal intentions as they work in partnership with industry and various discipline clusters to foster knowledge that has both practical and social outcomes (Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010).

Finally, goal intentions framed in economic and social terms also need to be considered through the prism of a range of demographic factors (age, gender, education) and workplace factors (cultural environment, discipline). For example, goal intentions may reflect gender issues when sufficient numbers of women in academe collectively advocate a need to develop female middle managers for reasons of gender balance, skills shortages and impending mass retirements (Wallace and Marchant, 2009). Alternatively, goal intentions may encompass a discipline group’s motivation to educate students to be more socially responsible when sufficient numbers of management academics believe that their colleagues, institutions and other stakeholders should support these behavioural intentions (Baden and Higgs, 2015; Moosmayer, 2012).

1.4.5 Role Expectations

Managers do their jobs differently partly because they see them differently and partly because powerful others in the manager’s social network voice their sentiments (and threats) as to how the manager should (and should not) behave (Fondas and Stewart, 1994). These role expectations often exert a powerful influence in regulating the behaviour of managers, particularly if role senders are in regular contact with the manager and/or have some stake in evaluating the manager’s performance.9

Perspective taking is influenced by the various role expectations others have of the academic-manager in terms of fulfilling the demands of the position. Role expectations, such as how the academic-manager should behave and the priorities she/he should give to certain tasks and projects, are communicated by people who have a stake in the manager’s performance. Because middle managers (for example, deans, research directors) and senior managers (for example, pro-vice chancellor, director of finance) are dependent on heads of department to manage performance in their respective work units effectively, they voice expectations about what the head should do as part of their role (Jackson, 1999; Lee, 2004).
Often these role expectations are subject to external audit (for example, research assessment exercises) and internal scrutiny (for example, university executive/faculty meetings) and used to evaluate the head’s performance thus placing greater role strain on the role incumbent (Hancock, 2007).

If the role expectations of academic-managers and others conflict significantly with each other, the head of department, like other sensitive professional-manager positions, is likely to face a role dilemma (Middlehurst, 1993). For example, the dilemma may consist of conflicting research role expectations: the dean expects the head to manage research performance according to established university targets and academic colleagues want the professional autonomy to pursue their own individual research agendas. Such a dilemma is a key feature of the head’s role and it arises from the dual identity afforded to the position – one of which is manager/leader of the department, the other which is an academic colleague (Parker, 2004).

Reconciling the conflicting demands of senior managers and colleagues can be stressful for a head of department (Middlehurst, 1993). In which particular group (if any) should the loyalties of the head of department lie? Should the head cosy up to the dean and adopt a managerial approach given the dean may have played an important role in their appointment and is evaluating their performance primarily in “income generation” terms (Macfarlane, 2011a)? Or should the head adopt more of a collegiate approach and align themselves with members of their own department given he/she will continue working with when their position as head expires? Or can the head adopt more of a hybrid approach and ‘walk the tightrope’ between the two groups’ role expectations? Crucially, the approach the head of department decides to take will depend on a range of factors – such as how they think their performance will be judged by significant others – and how it fits their own ideological beliefs, values and goal intentions.

1.5 SUMMARY

This chapter has portrayed managing as an active process of perspective taking designed to see the organisational world from “another’s point of view” (Parker et al., 2008). Depicting perspective taking as a sense-making process allows academic-managers to consider doing their jobs differently because they see them differently. Sensemaking also assigns value to managers exercising some degree of choice in reconstructing their social worlds to fit different meanings of the situation – social
meanings that might reflect the role expectations of others – as well as their own personal values, emotions and goal intentions.

Defining public universities as multiple-identity, hybrid organisations suggests different economic, professional and social interpretations of managing academic work and scholarship. Allowing for differences in the ways academics and academic work might be valued and managed makes it possible to move away from unitary conceptions of management that all organisations (including higher education) are governed effectively and legitimately by just one managerial perspective.