

Research and Development Series

IN THE WINGS AND BACKSTAGE:

**EXPLORING THE MICROPOLITICS OF
LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Research Report

Professor Jacky Lumby
University of Southampton

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Executive summary

Why micropolitics?

Higher education leadership research, my own included¹, reveals gaps in our understanding about the less visible, and perhaps less conscious activity that lies beneath formal leadership. Macropolitics in leadership involves overt displays of authority, and political lobbying and manoeuvring to gain advantage on the regional or national stage. In comparison, micropolitics encompasses a range of influencing behaviours, using social skills and interpersonal assets to achieve change through daily, often informal, activity. The exercise of power is a key facet.

Micropolitics is arguably so habitual in everyday leadership activity that for much of the time we stop noticing. Though exercised in often seemingly trivial choices, for example what to communicate and how, who to invite 'on board', what to reveal or conceal, what rewards or disincentives to put in play, this paper suggests it is the subtext of higher education and a fundamental engine of organisational change.

Focus of the study

The aim of the research and the focus of this paper are to open micropolitical behaviour in higher education institutions (HEIs) to scrutiny and to address the gap that exists between 'the organizational world which is presented in theory and research and the organizational world we all experience'². The paper explores a range of literature and the views of HEI leaders on micropolitics in order to understand better current perspectives and methods, and to stimulate discussion of how the sector might collectively reflect on and develop this area of leadership practice.

The perspective of leaders in different functions, varied sizes and types of HEI, and different geographic contexts in the UK was explored in 18 interviews. Fourteen held a senior role in an HEI. Four were Leadership Foundation staff/associates. The analysis identified a range of underpinning theory-in-use and theory-in-action. The aim was to undo the partiality of leadership narratives where micropolitics and power are bleached out. The major themes emerging from the analysis are set out below.

Emerging themes

The interviews indicated variation in the degree to which micropolitics is seen as omnipresent, necessary or positive. Some believed that micropolitical behaviour is clearly visible; others perceived it as hidden or unnecessary. The more prevalent view was that micropolitics is ubiquitous and offers benefits. A minority was uncomfortable with its exercise or desired leadership that transcends micropolitics, or both.

Leaders and power

The literature suggests that using power is a key aspect of micropolitics. There was reluctance by some to own power. Others were robust in acknowledging its centrality to their practice. Narratives display different concepts of power and a range of tactics. Although a display of direct power to impel is seen as generally inappropriate and ineffective, there are examples of it in use. Different approaches, establishing parameters for what can be spoken, or persuading others to believe their advantage to be identical with that of the leader, are also evident. The influence of power appeared very evident in seemingly rational processes.

Exploring micropolitical strategies

Micropolitical strategies were described as habitually part of the most common mechanisms of leadership; managing structure, communication, information and meetings are all explored in the paper. There were different perceptions about information flows. Some believed staff know or can find out anything. Others believed staff are often ill informed. The strategy to command information varies; some aspired to openness, while others had different approaches to partially concealing information. Tactics such as using misinformation were also reported.

1 Lumby (2012)

2 Brosky (2011) p2

The conduct of meetings reflected micropolitical techniques. The majority of those interviewed believed that formal committees are not usually the locus of decision-making. They recounted a range of tactics to achieve desired outcomes both outside and within meetings. However, on occasion, passion and commitment were the drivers of decisions rather than micropolitical manoeuvres.

Legitimacy and integrity

The evidence from this group of leaders suggests that explicit consideration of the legitimacy of micropolitical behaviour is infrequent. Persistent pursuit of legitimacy was judged to equate with integrity. The importance of organisational goals was in itself sometimes seen to justify micropolitical behaviour. Neither these data nor anything in the literature provide a reliable method of judging positive and negative forms of micropolitics, but it seems a greater degree of thoughtfulness and explicit discussion is needed.

Developing micropolitical skills

A change in the relationship with power is fundamental in the transition to a leadership role. 'Intuitive savvy'³ in using power and micropolitical tactics is unlikely to be sufficient. Some interviewees were not optimistic about the usefulness of time-limited development programmes. Others were more sanguine. The possibilities of mentoring, coaching and apprenticeship with a more extended period for development and greater confidentiality were viewed as helpful, as were peer networks. Overall, there was support for offering rigorous preparation in relation to micropolitical skills.

Looking forward

This paper draws from the findings to set out some propositions for debate. It argues that at the **individual level**, leaders need to engage more mindfully with their use of micropolitics and, in particular, their use of power. They need not only to consider the spectrum of their own behaviour but also to confront any unacceptable tactics used by others.

- **At the organisational level**, each HEI can facilitate reflection on practice and establish standards for action.
- **At the national level**, the preparation and development of HEI leaders needs to engage more explicitly with the nature, acquisition and effects of power. Study of power, influence and micropolitical strategies should be core content in programmes. Leaders also need more development related to macropolitics and its connection to micropolitics.
- **Programmes** should raise awareness of how socialisation and discrimination in relation to gender, ethnicity and other characteristics are related to micropolitical behaviour.
- **Future research** is needed to further unravel the nuances and subtleties of daily activity at the micropolitical level. Research on the technical aspects of leading HEIs remains incomplete without knowledge of the relationships and manoeuvring that drive and shape such processes.

Final word

This paper sets out to stimulate debate. It will not overturn the reluctance to be open about micropolitics, nor eradicate illegitimate micropolitical behaviour. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it may influence the efforts of individual leaders and those who support them towards a more conscious and positive use of micropolitical skills.

1. Why micropolitics?

Leadership research in higher education, my own included⁴, reveals gaps in our understanding about the less visible and possibly less conscious activity that lies beneath formal leadership, that is, the micropolitics.

While macropolitics in leadership entails overt political lobbying and manoeuvring to gain advantage on the regional or national stage, micropolitics employs strategies to gain advantage, but these are at the organisational level and often hidden from view. Micropolitics encompasses a range of influencing behaviours that use social skills and interpersonal assets to achieve change through daily, often informal, activity. The exercise of power is key. Embedded in how relationships and communication are pursued, in alliances and conflicts, and in a host of choices about structures and resources, micropolitics is arguably so habitual in everyday leadership activity that for much of the time we stop noticing. This should not deceive us into thinking it is unimportant. We are not aware of the air we breathe, yet its absence would end life. Micropolitics is the air of organisations. Though exercised in often seemingly trivial choices, for example what to communicate and how, who to invite 'on board', what to reveal or conceal, what rewards or disincentives to put in play, this paper suggests micropolitics is the subtext of higher education and a fundamental engine of organisational change.

This is an important issue as leaders confront micropolitics daily and reflect on the boundaries of their understanding and the skills needed for success. Some may be uncomfortable accepting this or consider such activity to be intrinsically illegitimate⁵. Others believe that micropolitical strategies are vital to achieve valid purposes, for organisational rather than personal ends⁶. Micropolitics can have both positive and negative effects, and while leaders may have no choice but to engage with and be subject to micropolitical activity, how they do so and for what purpose remains within their control⁷.

The research reported here aims to open micropolitical behaviour in HEIs to scrutiny and to address the gap that exists between 'the organizational world which is presented in theory and research and the organizational world we all experience'⁸. The intention is to stimulate debate and to inform the Leadership Foundation on further developing its support for leaders to engage more mindfully with the day-to-day practice of leadership. 'Political activity must be turned into positive politics, and the first stage is to recognise the existence of political activity and how it is manifest'⁹. This is what the paper sets out to achieve, exploring the micro-, personal, daily politics of higher education leadership.

This paper presents a range of literature and views of HEI leaders on micropolitics to understand better current perspectives and methods, and to stimulate discussion of how the sector might collectively reflect on and develop this area of leadership practice. It comprises: a brief review of the literature on micropolitics in organisations; the aim and methods used to collect relevant data from leaders; and a discussion of the emerging key themes and the implications for leadership and leadership development.

4 Lumby (2012)

5 Samier (2014) p35

6 Ahearn et al (2004)

7 Ahearn et al (2004) p311

8 Brosky (2011) p2

9 Milliken (2001) p79

2. Knowledge about micropolitics and leadership

Perceptions of micropolitics

The literature on micropolitics is diffuse, wide ranging and spreads across several disciplines, with links to many concepts and theories, for example, emotional intelligence¹⁰, leader–member exchange theory¹¹, intergroup theory¹² and change management¹³. Extracting from such a varied and contradictory body of work is challenging if one is to remain within the constraints of word length. Therefore, this literature review is necessarily selective.

Even agreeing a definition of micropolitics presents problems. A number of definitions emerge from research in corporations and in education, and power is seen as a foundational focus in most. An initial definition was offered in the introductory section of this paper: ‘a range of influencing behaviours that use social skills and assets to achieve change through daily, often informal, activity. The exercise of power is key’. Samier draws on Willower’s description of micropolitics as an ‘examination of power, control, ideologies, interests, conflicts, consensus, and negotiation’¹⁴.

For many, the connotations of micropolitics are wholly negative and relate strongly to the legacy of Machiavelli¹⁵ in medieval Italy. The darker side of micropolitics, the covert and surreptitious¹⁶ in organisations replete with conflict and power struggles¹⁷, is evident in research, but numerous other studies have suggested that this represents a very skewed picture. Hall¹⁸, for example, concluded that educational leaders are ‘using “power over”, “power through” and “power with” as appropriate’, and that ‘any micropolitical strategy can be manipulative or authentic, a departure from those views of micro-politics as malignant’¹⁹. Some research suggests that, far from being a destructive phenomenon that should be shunned by all right-thinking people, micropolitics is a vital aspect of the positive practice of leadership²⁰ and that organisational outcomes are often tightly tied to the nature of micropolitical activity. Milliken researched a higher education business school and concluded that ‘at best, micropolitical environments interact positively to advance the school’s purposes but at their worst they make the organisation dysfunctional’²¹. Overall, research into micropolitics surfaces a wide range of activity, from that intended to further organisational outcomes through legitimate or helpful action, to that intended to achieve only individual benefit, through action considered illegitimate.

Power and micropolitics

Power is a central concern in studies of micropolitics. Its effectiveness relates to an ability to exert unobtrusive influence or control in ways not readily apparent to others²². Therefore, for pragmatic reasons, to make power work most efficiently, and sometimes to protect a self-image people are often unconscious of the process of using power, or even if conscious may deny its use.

Power is most commonly conceived as a quality possessed by an individual or group by virtue of their role, or some other attribute such as expertise, charisma, gender, ethnicity, control of resource and so on²³. Some have stressed such sources of power are built on ‘asymmetrical patterns of dependence’²⁴, where the ownership or acquisition of one or more of these assets renders others to some degree reliant on the holder. Dependence renders people more likely to do what those they depend on say. However, this concept of power is very limited. Power is evident not merely in the ability overtly to make others act as they would not otherwise have done, but also in the capacity to influence structures, relationships and events so that others come to behave or even to think in ways that are preferred, while remaining unconscious of the use of power in the process²⁵. A leader may hold power in this way, not so much through authority to impel but through the capacity to arrange things so that an aim is achieved in more indirect ways²⁶. Morgan expresses it as ‘an ability to define the reality of others in ways that lead them to perceive and enact relations that one desires’²⁷. Differing approaches to the exercise of power may reflect a micropolitical continuum: ‘force, authority, manipulation, threat/promise, persuasion, and influence’²⁸.

10 Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2013)

11 Bhal & Ansari (2007)

12 Sidanius & Pratto (1999)

13 Milliken (2001)

14 Samier (2014) p53

15 Machiavelli (1975 [1513])

16 Hoyle (1986)

17 Ball (1987)

18 Hall (1989)

19 *ibid* p143

20 Ahearn et al (2004); Ferris et al (2000)

21 Milliken (2001) p77

22 Ahearn et al (2004) p311; Pfeffer (1981)

23 Bell & Hughes-Jones (2008)

24 Morgan (2006) p193

25 Taylor Webb (2008)

26 Pfeffer (1981)

27 Morgan (1986) p185

28 Fairholm (2009) p12

However, there are alternative perspectives of power and how it is exercised. Arendt²⁹ linked power to the Roman idea of *civitas*. In her view, no individual holds power in their own person. Rather, power is invested in an individual through the support of a number of people. 'Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow'³⁰. Even the most authoritative role, therefore, derives power through the vocal or tacit support of others. If a sufficient number refuse to comply or act to subvert plans, leaders cannot succeed, whatever the apparent authority of their role. From this perspective, micropolitics can be a process of accruing power through building engagement and support to enact the public good.

As these differing concepts of power illustrate, power may flow in varying directions, from the many to the one and vice versa, and its construction is far more sophisticated than the exertion of mere authority. Above all, as Foucault³¹ insisted, power is constantly present and persistently negotiated. In Ball's words, 'the sinews of power are embedded in mundane practices'³². Power may be sustained in the formal meeting or policy document, but no more so than in the chat that precedes the meeting. As Morley notes, in HEIs even seemingly rational, bureaucratic or democratic processes embed the micropolitical exercise of power³³. Leaders' daily practice of micropolitics therefore matters a good deal.

Micropolitics in higher education

All organisations are political, but perhaps because of the push back to authority from many in the higher education sector who prefer 'self-leadership'³⁴, micropolitical processes may be more intense in HEIs than in other kinds of corporation, where decisions may be more straightforwardly implemented.

In higher education a sense of entitlement and irreconcilable views lead to conflict which is reflected in the 'power struggles, envies and jealousies, and covert structures'³⁵ of academic life. Again and again in studies of how effective leadership is conceived in HEI, protecting others is perceived by staff as a central requirement. Sometimes this is explicit, such as 'safeguarding membership in the academic community'³⁶ or 'effective leaders protect their staff'³⁷, and sometimes it is couched in terms such as valuing leaders who can be trusted³⁸. The result is an environment in which the primary expectation of many employees is for leaders to support them individually, instead of the institution corporately.

Over 25 years ago, Becher described universities as being like a theatre, consisting of onstage, backstage and under-stage activity³⁹. Onstage is the public arena. Backstage is the work of groups of people organising what is projected to the HEI community and the public. Under-stage activities are the private conversations, the decisions on what to communicate and how, who to invite on board, and tactics to influence and to persuade. Given how much the principle of transparency is prized, the 'under' does not sit comfortably with many. Nevertheless, most would accept that not all activity is transparent or open to scrutiny, so that to enact leadership consciously each individual must acknowledge, reflect upon and manage the full range of their leadership, including what goes on under-stage.

In considering such activity, the micropolitics, we might also admit Bolden's⁴⁰ stricture to take account of the human condition. He quotes Kellerman: 'Leaders are like the rest of us: trustworthy and deceitful, cowardly and brave, greedy and generous'⁴¹. Micropolitical behaviour in HEIs, as elsewhere, is likely to mirror a range of human qualities.

29 Arendt (1970)

30 *ibid* p241

31 Foucault (1980) p6

32 Ball (2013)p 6

33 Morley (2000)

34 Bolden et al (2012) p14

35 Samier (2014) p35

36 Bolden et al (2012) p6

37 Bryman (2007) p24

38 Gibbs et al (2009)

39 Becher (1988)

40 Bolden (2004)

41 Kellerman (2004) p45

Strategies and tactics

The literature on micropolitics in corporations and, to a lesser extent, HEIs and other education settings such as schools, identifies a range of micropolitical strategies, each with associated tactics.

Table 1: Micropolitical strategies and tactics

Acquiring the support of others:	Shaping discussion and decisions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building coalitions and networks • trading • cooption • incentives such as endorsement or allocating rewards • aligning with more powerful players • citing support from external experts or upward appeal⁴². 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation • shaping selection, presentation and circulation of information • shaping committee/meeting membership • shaping meeting agendas • shaping criteria for decision-making⁴³.
Creating a favourable impression:	Weakening opposition:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inspirational appeal • rationality • assertiveness • self-promotion • ingratiation⁴⁴. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • surveillance • blaming/attacking • imposing penalties⁴⁵.

This list presents the actions associated with particular strategies. There is of course a good deal of interplay and crossover in the behaviours. Perceptions of legitimacy are likely to be more strongly linked to some actions than others, and consequently HEI leaders may feel comfortable acknowledging only some of these behaviours, even to themselves. For example, inspirational appeal aligns closely with the preferred HEI leader prototype: visionary, transformative, collegial. Ingratiation would rarely fit the self-image of a leader⁴⁶.

In summary, the current study draws on a range of literature to shape the questions to be explored with higher education leaders about the meanings and use of micropolitics and to investigate whether there is now significant challenge to the position articulated by Morgan nearly 20 years ago: 'Politics... is seen as a dirty word. This is unfortunate because it may prevent us from recognizing that politics and politicking are an essential aspect of organizational life and not necessarily an optional and dysfunctional extra'⁴⁷.

Developing micropolitical skills

The normative depiction of leadership development often relates to leadership theory and standards that are positioned firmly onstage. For example, commitment to gender equality is assumed, though research suggests that behind the scenes, action sustains the unequal status quo⁴⁸. Parallel to the onstage focus is a millennia-old conviction that preparation for leadership must consider the backstage and under-stage arenas. Ahearn and colleagues⁴⁹ suggest that 'performance, effectiveness, and career success are determined less by intelligence and hard work, and more by social astuteness, positioning, and savvy'⁵⁰. Developing micropolitical skills is important, then, for career development. The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that effective leaders have highly developed micropolitical skills and that such skills are key to achieving change. Developing rational tools and approaches to leadership is important⁵¹ but both for career development and to be effective, the mindful use of micropolitical skills is also essential.

42 Hoyle (1999); Blase & Anderson (1995); Eden (2001)

43 Higgins et al (2003); Hancock & Hellawell (2003); Samier (2014)

44 Ahlquist & Levi (2011); Charbonneau (2004); Curtis (2003); Higgins et al (2003); Pfeffer (1981)

45 Samier (2014)

46 Charbonneau (2004)

47 Morgan (2006) p150

48 Morley (2006)

49 Ahearn et al (2004)

50 ibid p311

51 Higgins et al (2003); Bebbington (2009)

How to support the development of micropolitical skills is the question. Ferris and colleagues⁵² developed a political skills inventory that has been tested in an education context, measuring four dimensions: '(1) social astuteness, (2) interpersonal influence, (3) networking ability and (4) apparent sincerity'⁵³. Development that attempts to build such skills, particularly the last, are founded on the acceptance of values that some in education would see as distasteful and others as honest and realistic. Given that often people are unwilling or uncomfortable to bring to the surface some aspects of their leadership, a range of development methods has been suggested to open discussion by more indirect routes than just describing personal experience. These include 'experiential exercises, cases, vicarious learning, role-playing, and communication skill training'⁵⁴.

An example of a different approach is Sullivan's suggestion that leaders should refer to Aristotle's advice on rhetoric: that to avoid negative aspects of micropolitics such as manipulation and disempowerment, leaders must attempt to meet the requirements of the community for 'good sense, virtue and good will'⁵⁵. He believes that politics is artful, that is, deliberately designed to elicit specific responses from the community, but is also founded on values. Machiavelli, viewed by some as the arch-villain proponent of amoral leadership, also stressed the necessity of adhering to values in order to avoid becoming a figure of contempt⁵⁶. A values-based approach to developing micropolitical skills might be well served by mentoring, which enables self-interrogation of values, actions and their inter-relationship as embedded in leadership.

52 Ferris et al (2005)

53 *ibid* p.128

54 Ferris et al (2000) p34

55 Sullivan (1997) p11

56 Machiavelli (1975 [1513])

3. Data collection

Investigating leadership is always problematic. Observing what leaders do does not necessarily reveal the thinking, attitudes and intentions that underlie action. Surveys by questionnaire or interviews intended to explore thinking are likely to elicit responses that project the preferred identity of the respondent and are inevitably self-selective. Despite the fact that people may not be fully conscious of their micropolitical tactics or may be uncomfortable acknowledging them, the interview was nevertheless judged to be the most viable way of exploring if and how leaders understand and engage with micropolitics.

A convenience sample of 18 leaders (nine men and nine women) was selected from a range of institutions. Respondents were engaged in a variety of roles across the UK. A sampling matrix was created listing the different higher education mission groups, and no mission group, along one axis, and size of student enrolment along the other. Cells were populated with a convenience sample to include staff of both genders and in different roles at a range of institutions. Of the 18 people interviewed, 14 held a senior role in an HEI, including council member, vice-chancellor, deputy/pro-vice-chancellor, registrar/university secretary, dean, faculty administrator and head of department, encompassing those with responsibility at organisational, faculty and departmental levels. Four respondents from the Leadership Foundation were interviewed because of their key role in developing leadership skills for higher education.

The aim of the interview was to understand more about if and how individuals engage with micropolitics and how this translates into daily practice. Interviews explored the extent of people's recognition of micropolitics in a higher education environment and the degree to which interviewees felt it to be important; how power was perceived and used; and how people understood the legitimacy or otherwise of actions were discussed. Ethical approval was granted on the basis of a tight control of anonymity. Consequently, where quotations are given, the role of the speaker is indicated but there is no numbering to indicate a particular individual and no other potentially identifiable information.

The data were analysed thematically, drawing on the key issues from the literature. The coding of themes allowed clustering and patterns to emerge around the existence, purpose and nature of micropolitics. Beliefs about the use of power and the ethics of micropolitics were also coded to identify the range of different values, concepts and actions. Variation in micropolitical practice in the most common vehicles of leadership, establishing structures, communication, information and meetings, are prioritised in this paper. Given the size of the sample of respondents, a representative picture was not the aim. Rather the process was one of identifying a range of underpinning theory-in-use and theory-in-action sufficient to stimulate debate.

As expected, those interviewed did not generally describe themselves using those tactics that are most likely to be viewed as illegitimate, but were often open about their use of other tactics. Though pertinent questions were asked, a relatively small amount of data in relation to gender and other characteristics of under-represented groups resulted.

Those interviewed engaged with the operational and ethical issues raised by micropolitics. They recounted daily dilemmas of how to confront the micropolitics of leadership while remaining the person they wished to be. In opening up micropolitics, they helped to undo the partiality of leadership narratives where power and politics are bleached out.

4. Micropolitics and power

Acknowledging micropolitics

All those interviewed were aware of the use of micropolitical behaviour in the leadership of higher education. However, there was variation in the degree to which they saw it as omnipresent, necessary or positive. Some were emphatic about its centrality:

it's the essence and the life blood of all universities.

(LF respondent)

it is a fact of organisational life that there is micropolitical activity.

(vice-chancellor)

there is a group of vice-chancellors who are extremely engaged in what you might call the 'under-stage' activity.

(vice-chancellor)

For some, micropolitics was 'just normal business activity' (pro-vice-chancellor) and labelling it 'backstage' was seen as inappropriate and unhelpful; it was in full view and rightly so.

In contrast, despite its ubiquity, for others the presence of micropolitics was obscured: 'there is a socialised set of almost anthropological rituals that seek to deflect attention from it' (LF staff/associate). The paradox of these different views was neatly summarised by one respondent: 'I do think it's covert except it is also very obvious. It's only covert in that it's not discussed' (LF respondent). Rather as in Edgar Allan Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter'⁵⁷, where a stolen object is left in full view and as such escapes notice, the exercise of micropolitics is both in full view in 'almost everything we do' (faculty administrator) yet also invisible.

There were different views on whether micropolitics is a necessary or even vital element of effective leadership:

It's the way things get done.

(LF respondent)

It's essential. I don't know how you would do the job without, sort of, being aware of the micropolitical context... and seeking to manage it.

(vice-chancellor)

It's the oil in the system, it's the glue, whatever metaphor you want to use. It's essential, I would say.

(registrar)

Others felt that micropolitics was necessary but only in certain circumstances, for example where a difficult change process needed to be effected quickly. One pro-vice-chancellor felt that it was necessary only because of the way HEIs are currently structured. More collaborative working and more openness would remove the need for micropolitics. For this leader, there was a deep unease with ways of working that might be less than transparent. A similar view was expressed by another: that micropolitics could be put aside to effect a different way of working:

When you have developed high levels of trust and when you are in a team and you're working on truly intractable or unsolvable puzzles as opposed to problems which you can solve... that's a totally different kind of working which requires a kind of authentic leadership... putting political issues to one side and I think in my experience that can happen to a degree.

(LF respondent)

The more prevalent view was that micropolitics was essential and offered benefits such as building consensus around decisions, greater likelihood of successful implementation, achieving a more direct form of connection with staff and reaching more favourable political settlements. Indeed, one respondent went so far as to depict the cause of failure in a leadership role as, in nearly all cases, a 'lack of understanding of soft power' (registrar); that is, the exercise of micropolitics.

Context

Most respondents drew a connection between the context of higher education and the necessity for micropolitics. The increasingly complex legislative and competitive environment demanded multifaceted approaches. 'Hence, it isn't enough simply to exert influence down the line management chain, one needs to be able to influence across, and upwards as well' (registrar). Where there is no authority relationship, influence is all⁵⁸.

Some stressed the existence of a distinctive institutional culture whose roots lie partly in historic organisational models with complex committee structures and decision-making processes. These may have appeared to have a good deal of power but, some believed, in practice effected little change: 'the old Soviet model of, you know, slight change up, slight change down' (vice-chancellor). Power was exerted to sustain existing power differentials: in effect, no change. Against longstanding relative inertia, direct pressure for change through authority was a weak force: just pushing the concrete block was hard work and achieved little momentum. The leverage of influence, enlisting others to join in the effort, pulling from in front as well as pushing from behind, was more effective in higher education's cultural context.

As a result, many respondents stressed that, 'because of the type of community we are, [we] cannot operate by command and control' (vice-chancellor). Using alternative means of influence involved challenging supposedly rational beliefs, which often masked irrational, entrenched myths. For example, stories abound concerning which parts of an HEI were generating a surplus or deficit, who was favoured and who disadvantaged by current systems, and narratives related to historic critical incidents, for example 'the decision of the senate 20 years ago' (vice-chancellor). Leadership practice was superficially framed though rational discourse, but was designed to encompass power tussles within an emotional landscape redolent with myth and fable.

Overall, the dominant view from this group of leaders was that the mix of external pressures and internal organisational characteristics meant increasingly 'if you want to operate in a university, then you have to learn to operate through influence' (vice-chancellor). Influence is only one element on the spectrum of micropolitical behaviours but, as perhaps the most publicly acceptable, it was the one most likely to be mentioned by respondents. It is taken here as a proxy for a potentially wider range of activity, including the exercise of power.

Leaders and power

Accepting power

Though power is at the core of micropolitics, its use is not accepted by some who are uncomfortable acknowledging that leaders exercise power: 'We don't like using the word power' (registrar). One LF respondent believed that 'higher education has more difficulty with power and conversations about power than any other context'. Several respondents believed that there was little clarity or debate about it, nationally or organisationally.

Some respondents were more ready to acknowledge their use of power than others. For example, one vice-chancellor believed that:

Power comes with the role. I mean I'm under no illusion about that. I think you almost literally put it on if you like with the office of a vice-chancellor.

(vice-chancellor)

Another was highly aware of the centrality of power:

We're in a highly hierarchical society where deals are made based on different perceptions of power and you can't separate leadership and power

(vice-chancellor)

This might suggest that senior leaders had grown more habituated and so more comfortable with the use of power, but this was not so. For example, one vice-chancellor did not consciously think about power on taking up the role:

I don't think I thought of having to build a power base but I did think... about building, what I would describe as a legitimacy base... I was quite clear in my own mind and quite strategic about how was I going to go about building that legitimacy base but I never, funnily enough, thought about it as a power base.

(vice-chancellor)

It may be that using different language mitigates the negative connotations of power. For the majority of those interviewed, power appeared sufficiently illicit to provoke psychological strategies to obscure its use, even to the self – or perhaps most importantly to the self.

Some did not accept its use as necessary or legitimate. For example, one pro-vice-chancellor commented: 'I have learned that there is a necessity to try and create power or power structures in ways which I am ideologically and ethically opposed to'. For this respondent, power was connected to the 'patriarchal structures of higher education, and by that I don't just mean male leaders... so I am not using patriarchal to determine different genders but a way of being and thinking, which is about competition'. Structural factors may create pressure to use power in particular in ways, which amongst other effects, sustains patriarchal values.

Concepts of power

To some extent, power was conceived by interviewees as an abstract, disembodied phenomenon:

Power was something... it didn't even flow downwards, it kind of bobbed about a bit on the waves.

(vice-chancellor)

or:

Power is a little bit like a budgie running around under a carpet. You can see this little lump running around and you can run around with a cricket bat and you can try and you know, bash the budgie down and flatten it so there is no power in the organisation but my gosh, it'll run around and it'll pop up somewhere else.

(LF respondent)

Such views indicate awareness that there are very many sites of power, fluidly changing on an ongoing basis. The most common idea of power referred to by this group of leaders was Lukes⁵⁹ one-dimensional concept, where power impels others to act as they would not otherwise have done. For example, a head of department described some meetings as 'a war zone', while a vice-chancellor described responding to the intimidating behaviour of some senior staff by use of direct power:

I said 'OK Professor X, Doctor Y or whatever, come in here, sit there. Right, would you like to explain to me which bit of being a professor entails behaving like A, B, C and D'. That caused some reverberations around the University, that I had done that. You might say, well that's the exercise of raw power.

(vice-chancellor)

The justification for such use of power was countering an abuse of power in others. However, this form of power was rejected by some as generally ineffective and or illegitimate:

If you have to exercise power in its naked form you're perhaps doing something not quite right.

(LF respondent)

Power implies that you can make things happen easily and I have always been aware that that's not possible.... So someone may feel powerful... but it's to some extent delusory.

(dean of faculty)

The raw display of power that one might exhibit in more hierarchical organisations would probably just not cut it in a university.
(vice-chancellor)

The ‘not quite right’ of the first quotation captures the fusion of moral and pragmatic objections. Consequently, a frank use of power in the face of opposition was seen as uncommon by some:

I can count on one hand the number of times that I have exercised my will and said, well I'm in charge so this is what we are going to do, despite all your misgivings, despite everything, we're doing it.
(dean of faculty)

As a Leadership Foundation respondent pointed out, such a concept of power is predicated on ‘this idea that power is a zero-sum game: if I take mine... there's less of it left for you’. The same respondent believed that middle leaders were comfortable with ‘power with or power to or power for’ that was endorsed by theories such as distributed leadership⁶⁰, but that the transition to a senior role involved ‘a much more isolated use of power’ with which many were uncomfortable.

The notion that power is like currency, creating agency through its accumulation and potentially conferred by one on another, has been recognised for decades⁶¹. More sophisticated conceptions of power have emerged in business and education settings and, while less common, are apparent amongst this group of leaders. One vice-chancellor was clearly aware of Lukes’⁶² three-dimensional power: that, rather than impelling others, ‘you get people to want what you want them to want’. The vice-chancellor did not like using power in this way, and would persist in presenting evidence in the hope that people’s rational view of the situation would change. Evidence from others would also be considered. However, this respondent acknowledged that how evidence is received is influenced by the power of the person presenting it – who you are changes how you are heard. The ‘power imbalance you always have to remind yourself of’ (vice-chancellor) is a critical factor in attempts to provoke debate. Awareness of such power disparity is asymmetric and may be more apparent to those with lesser status⁶³.

The intention to initiate inclusive debate and build agreement implies a concept of power closer to Arendt’s⁶⁴ belief that power is invested by the many, not owned by the individual. A number of respondents believed that this represented the primary process within HEIs. It would seem that discomfort with the idea of exercising power leads some to disavow its use. There were, however, narratives that demonstrate awareness of power and individual experience of using it in different forms. A more self-aware and effective exercise of power might follow if support for the practice of leadership called for individuals to confront more explicitly a self-identity that rejects power while continuing to use it. For others with an acute awareness of how power permeates every aspect of their leadership, greater challenge might help them unpack more clearly the nature and effect of the way in which power is used.

60 Bolden, Petrov & Gosling (2009)

61 Parsons (1963)

62 Lukes (1974)

63 Dovidio et al (2002)

64 Arendt (1970)

5. Exploring micropolitical strategies

Micropolitical strategies emerged through the interviews as embedded in key processes, restructuring the organisation or subunit, managing meetings, information and communication. There was also a relationship between micropolitics and the conduct of macropolitics outside the organisation.

Acquiring the support of others: organisational structure

Power was linked to formal organisational structures in the perception of several of those interviewed, who suggested that any structures will have embedded power relations that a leader may wish to adjust:

Sometimes the only way to change the power differentials is through a formal review of governance or structures, or relationships or whatever and I have both led reviews like this, and observed others leading such reviews. It's often very clear the changes are being made in order to change the power dynamics.

(registrar)

In the view of one LF respondent, the use of direct power is necessary to achieve such change and is challenging for some leaders, coming as it does at an early stage of the transition to a new role. 'If you have to restructure, then you have no option but to use this power and that's what I think some people find quite difficult' (LF respondent). As a consequence, restructures of the whole or parts of the organisation are rarely openly justified in terms of shifting power. Rather, they are explained as clarifying reporting or budget accountability, or for financial reasons or to strengthen the organisation by judicious pruning or additions. All of these may be genuine reasons, but the primary purpose to adjust power relations is often obscured.

Restructuring was seen to be about the micropolitical strategy of acquiring the support of others. It will reward some, especially more powerful players, by enhancing the status of their role or unit, coopting some into particular positions and sometimes trading on issues such as unit titles or position in the hierarchy, and in this way builds coalitions and networks.

However, the use of Lukes'⁶⁵ one-dimensional power to decide upon an organisational structure is potentially a first stage only. In the view of a registrar:

You also need to persuade people that they want to buy into and adopt the change; you have to persuade the players, or enough of them, to your way of thinking. It isn't enough just to change the formal arrangements.

If a first stage uses one-dimensional power to establish a new structure in the face of opposition, a second stage achieves buy in by a different use of power. Lukes' two-dimensional power works by establishing what is acceptable and what is transgressive. This ensures that debate is inhibited in any areas that do not support those with most power. Three-dimensional power goes further still and aims at socialisation into ways of thinking and acting, such that the interests of a dominant individual or group are accepted as indivisible from those of others. No leader will achieve universal buy-in by using two- or three-dimensional power. There will be some who persist in thinking differently from those in authority roles and who will speak up, often vociferously. Nevertheless, the evidence from this group of leaders suggests that two- and three-dimensional forms of power are used in HEIs. Indeed, if leadership is 'an ability to define the reality of others in ways that lead them to perceive and enact relations that one desires'⁶⁶, then it is essentially about the use of such three-dimensional power.

Shaping discussion and decisions: meetings

Shaping discussion and decisions was seen as an ongoing micropolitical challenge. To this end, the management of groups and committees and the use of information appeared as a common tactic.

The experience of the conduct of meetings varied. Alongside the espoused practice of encouraging rational debate and valuing different viewpoints there was awareness of other kinds of tactic in play, with individuals and interest groups manoeuvring towards preferred outcomes. Some found it hard to achieve robust debate. This may be because of inhibition in speaking against the view of the more powerful, or because of a sense that a decision has already been made. One vice-chancellor was very aware of the likely impact of his status and made a point of not speaking first on tricky issues so that others could not follow his cue.

65 Lukes (1974)

66 Morgan (1986) p185

67 Malen (1994)

Making clear the nature of the meeting, whether for information, consultation or to take a decision, was seen as helpful by several, to avoid 'window-dressing' (pro-vice-chancellor). There is some tension between this espoused practice and the belief of other respondents that, even in decision-taking meetings, in effect the decisions had already been taken. However, pre-meeting preparation did not guarantee agreement. Where the decision was going against that preferred by the chair or another powerful member, some respondents had experienced railroading, where tactics such as quick-fire questions, presentation of selective information (head of department), or insistence that a decision be made immediately (registrar) were used. 'Kicking into touch' was also reported, where an issue could be avoided by displacement activity such as asking a subgroup to consider it.

The majority of respondents believed that, in many cases, formal committees were not the locus of decision-making: 'You sort it out before the meeting starts' (vice-chancellor). A number of reasons were given for this practice. First, it was argued by several that decision-making in committees was impractical: 'Going into meetings with a paper, cold, can lose you a lot of time' (pro-VC). Meetings were sometimes large and to discuss proposals from scratch would, in effect, mean that a decision would be unlikely to be taken at that meeting. 'Actually getting to a considered view within a large meeting is rarely possible, so having sort of informal discussions with people who are on top of data in different ways, that's part of it' (dean).

However, it was not just a question of informing people, for example by circulating a paper in advance or checking data; it was perceived as necessary to achieve some agreement. As one pro-vice-chancellor put it, you want to circumvent a situation where 'antibodies are up and they will be resistant' or where 'views... especially when voiced in public, become incredibly entrenched... I'd say it's really trying to avoid mass counterproductive confrontation' (faculty administrator). Two approaches were suggested to avoid such a situation:

You can either do it covertly or overtly. Overtly you call a meeting which is off agenda...: call a meeting to say there is a one-item agenda and we are going to discuss a particular issue and you see how many people you can get on board. That's one way to do it and then that's more open, or you talk to individuals and that's the more sort of covert way of doing it but I don't see it as being lacking [in] respect for individuals or... Machiavellian, or anything because people need time sometimes to digest, think through, argue about certain issues.

(pro-vice-chancellor)

Lobbying was distinguished from conversations to take soundings. The latter were preferred to the former; however there was acknowledgement from some that 'it is on occasion a question of influence' (pro-vice-chancellor) and that 'you are highly likely to influence the chair or deputy chair' (vice-chancellor).

The possibility was also recognised that 'the corridor conversations, the toilet conversations' (LF respondent) could 'end up with in-crowds and out-crowds' (pro-vice-chancellor). Not everyone who arrived at a meeting would necessarily have been part of informal initial conversations and as 'up to speed' with the preference or decision of the most powerful, leaving them vulnerable to the group action of those who were. Sometimes it was not worth canvassing in advance, because of interpersonal tensions, such as one committee member likely to oppose anything proposed by another. In these situations, one pro-VC suggested that education was an option, by means of sending the person to an event where supporting data or arguments were presented by others or, as a last resort, the imposition of a decision. The use of threat was seen as illegitimate.

Another method for influencing the likely outcome of meetings was by means of writing the agenda and minutes. 'It is well known. It is a bit like the hand that rocks the cradle isn't it; the hand that writes the agenda and minutes has quite a lot of influence' (registrar). Some agendas are largely standing items, but where there is choice, for example about the order of items, and the way discussion and decisions are reported, crafting, with controversial agenda items placed late or minutes that obscure opposition, can impact on outcomes⁶⁷.

However, to suggest that micropolitics was always the means of shaping outcomes would be misleading. There were limits on the effectiveness of micropolitical activity. The attitude of those at a meeting may count, particularly that of the chair:

If the person who has been nobbled to be chair doesn't actually give a monkey's and is just there because they have been asked by the vice-chancellor to do it, then, you know, others behind the scenes might be able to put an agenda with a briefing note together that would lead the chair in a certain direction... If, on the other hand, the person chairing has all the ideas and you know, is completely sure of the direction of travel then you would have much less success if you had a counter view.

(registrar)

Passion and belief could also carry the day:

It's not always about power/authority but sometimes it's about passion and commitment that some characters will have in driving their agenda forward... They will just drive it with their enthusiasm and conviction. That is often, in my experience, what will carry the day no matter whether it's done at committee, a meeting, behind the scenes, in the corridor.

(registrar)

Although this latter respondent believed this is not a matter of power, it may be that the driving force described here is power with another basis: intellectual conviction rather than authority or status.

Shaping discussion and decisions: information

The relationship of information to power was raised by one vice-chancellor who believed that power 'is very, very closely related to your command of information'. Others to some extent implied this. However, there were contrary views. A Leadership Foundation respondent believed such an attitude to be outdated and that, 'the old cliché "knowledge is power"' was dying. Overall, the group of leaders interviewed reflected a conscious use of information to achieve their ends and different approaches to doing so.

The respondents made different assumptions about levels of institutional knowledge in higher education:

I tend to work on the assumption that in universities people know everything. I think that's the age you live in.

(vice-chancellor)

It's very dangerous to assume that the person you are talking to knows any less than you. I don't think there is anything that is 100 per cent secret.

(faculty administrator)

Others took the opposite position, believing staff were often ill informed. They used a range of media to communicate with staff but felt they often failed to reach many. The strategy related to 'command of information' varied. Some of those interviewed believed, barring matters that absolutely demanded confidentiality, openness was needed:

I have always spread information widely... I have always believed that's the right thing to do. This is not the first place that I have worked that senior colleagues have said, 'Oh no, you don't want to do it that way' or 'That's very dangerous if you say this or you say that or you say the next'. Why? What's the worst that could happen?

(vice-chancellor)

Several reflected distaste or distrust of 'hiding key bits of information' and saw it as counterproductive. A variation of this position was a belief that, while it was not right to conceal anything, staff needed to find it for themselves, otherwise neither side would 'really have any negotiating position' (vice-chancellor). The source of power in this case was not concealment, but having a more secure grasp of information than others.

If people haven't done their homework and not found stuff out, they're not really in a position to look after their own interests

(vice-chancellor)

A second group believed in openness but with mitigation. 'Spin' had a place:

If you want to put a positive spin on things... being able to communicate why you are doing something for all the positive reasons is essential I think. I am not talking about airbrushing the negatives, I mean, otherwise you just lose all credibility.

(faculty administrator)

A Leadership Foundation respondent provided a more nuanced understanding of openness, that it was 'how you say the things and the level of granularity you give those disclosures... that defines how far you are sharing'.

A third group reported experience of the use of information as a tactic of misinformation. Swamping meetings with large amounts of incomprehensible papers, stage-managing roadshows so that both presentation and questions are carefully controlled, and using minders to monitor what is seen or heard by visitors were all cited as tactics.

The need for evidence to inform proper communication was stressed by several respondents, although, as discussed earlier, how evidence is received may be influenced by the power and status of the person presenting it. Similarly, the interests of particular groups were seen as important in relation to how information is received. For example, one vice-chancellor described the perennial belief that science subsidises humanities and vice versa. Evidence contrary to the beliefs of a group would not necessarily be accepted, however well founded. In such cases, a process more like trade-off than rational communication might be needed to make progress. 'There are very pragmatic trade-offs done all the time at the micro level' (vice-chancellor).

Shaping discussion and decisions: communication

The process of communication was related to the use of information. One narrative that emerged emphasised the normative communication process evident in much literature on leadership; visibility, genuine interest in and empathy for others, being truthful, engaging in dialogue and creating trust through communication. Such a stance was exemplified by face-to-face meetings, especially in contentious situations, where people were respectfully given the opportunity to engage in dialogue rather than: 'the first difficult question — BANG, you know, somebody is sort of taken out for asking the question'. The stance needed to hold steady, even in the face of abuse: 'I held all the meetings and people shouted at me; people were horrible' (vice-chancellor).

Such behaviour equates to Becher's⁶⁸ onstage public arena. However, overall, the evidence suggests that communication is more complex than this. For one vice-chancellor, 'there is quite a connection between the way you behave in the front of stage and what you are enabled to do on the micropolitical side'. Micropolitics is often assumed to relate to backstage activity. Such a neat division was challenged. Onstage work was suggested to build a sort of credibility or currency that enabled different ways of operating:

The way in which you operate on the public stage, to carry on the metaphor, the way in which you engage with academic colleagues, the extent to which you are visible to them, the extent to which you are interested in their work, the extent to which you spend a lot of time with them, I think creates a context where people are more willing to give permission for activity which we might describe as micropolitical.

(vice-chancellor)

Two points follow. First, HEI staff may allow backstage discussion and decisions if the onstage protocols are satisfied. Several respondents stressed that staff just wanted a chance to express their views and that this was sufficient for many. Second, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish onstage public work and backstage micropolitics, for example inviting an individual for a cup of coffee in a public space to talk over an issue could be either:

Now is that micropolitical activity or is that front-of-stage activity? It's probably a bit of both, it's partly a bit of me, you know, being visible around and it's that kind of traditional front of stage, etc. but there is also, probably interestingly, micropolitical intent in doing that as well.

(vice-chancellor)

This was recognised by a pro-VC who generally refused invitations for a cup of coffee:

If somebody... said to me come and have a cup of coffee, I know they are wanting to manipulate me at some stage... so I go with my antennae up because micro working is both ways, isn't it? It's what you do and it's what's done to you.

(vice-chancellor)

The line between micropolitical and non-micropolitical conversations was hard for some to draw. For example, a registrar reflected on serendipitous conversation in a corridor, asking whether, if unplanned, it can be seen as micropolitics. An assumption in this question is that micropolitics is intentional, but this is not always the case. The data suggests that leaders are not always aware of micropolitical intent, only recognising it after the event.

The evidence from this group of leaders suggests contested narratives about communication. On the one hand, the normative behaviours of visibility, transparency and so on are valued. On the other, it is evident that different techniques are at play, for some at least:

Transparency is seen as a watchword for the democratic approach but you know, I think there are lots of good things that happen that aren't immediately transparent. That doesn't make them a bad thing, you know. I don't think it's a proxy for goodness.

(registrar)

Some leaders acknowledged that they concealed things, on occasion. Several believed that some decisions were never going to be acceptable to particular groups and, while protocols of communication and consultation had to be fulfilled,

'It can't be all about having roadshows and workshops and putting it on Facebook, 'cos you'd never get any work done'

(registrar)

Overall, the use of information and communication that emerges is far more varied than the normative depiction of transparency and openness.

Micropolitics and macropolitics

Several respondents identified a relationship between micropolitics and macropolitics. Rather than the latter being appropriate only at the more senior levels, one individual made a decision early in her career to accrue currency through building relationships with national figures⁶⁹. The driver was a conviction that merely leading within an HEI would not contribute enough to building the higher education she envisioned. It also built the individual's status within the organisation. 'That meant putting yourself out there to suffer sometimes humiliation, sometimes lack of dignity, whilst you learn the skills to manage those situations. So it was a long apprenticeship' (dean). Rejection and having to start again when key roles were reappointed made for a long, frustrating and sometimes distressing process, 'to play the longer game'.

Personal status could be built in part by demonstrating professional competence and enactment of values, but was also represented by display, for example of 'top banana'⁷⁰ accoutrements such as high salary, dress, range of support staff, or its polar opposite: public rejection of such signifiers of difference. Organisational status was perceived as largely given. For one vice-chancellor the higher education hierarchy, shaped in part by tradition and in part by indicators such as league tables, locks HEIs into largely immovable status relativities. Many HEIs are unable or do not wish to access international status symbols such as considerable research funding or high-attainment entrants, and so need a macropolitical strategy that can be delivered from a relative position of status weakness. This is built through positioning the organisation, particularly its espoused values, which in turn makes use of micropolitical strategies in the home organisation and regional/national networks.

Lobbying took place on a number of levels. 'We are actually engaged in a level of discussion that by definition has to remain private. The "onstage" stuff, the formal stuff, is one thing but in all honesty it is actually the least significant' (vice-chancellor). Pursuit of backstage discussion raises significant issues about legitimacy. Such activity, 'by definition, has to happen out of the public gaze and it could be malign and that's the danger of it; that it is a cosy club' (vice-chancellor). Legitimacy was in the intent,

70 Hood (1974) p126

71 Bazerman & Banaji (2004) p114

which must be to forward the interests of the organisation or sector, rather than a 'power trip' for the individual, seductive though that may be:

You can be caught up in the excitement of being that close to power and you can be seduced by it and you can become at worst a mouthpiece for what the government wants. I am extremely aware of the dangers of cooption.

(vice-chancellor)

The acknowledgement that such activity exposes the individual to the temptations of power raises issues of ethics and legitimacy that may not often be explicitly discussed in HEIs. It also raises questions about the neat division presented by some respondents between internal and external micropolitics. What is desired as an outcome of lobbying is likely to be the result of internal interaction in the organisation, as well as discussion at the macro level. In these circumstances, an initial negotiating position by consensus might not be possible, but rather a sense of where 'the balance of opinion' (vice-chancellor) lay was the starting point. How power is used to arrive at such a judgement, the relationship of the latter to in-groups and out-groups, mission group, organisational and self-interest, bring to the fore serious ethical issues about whose interests are pursued. The preparation and support to face such critical challenges do not appear widespread. The relationship of micro- and macropolitics was not one pursued explicitly in development programmes, in the experience of this group of leaders.

6. Micropolitics, legitimacy and integrity

The leadership journey, as described by one Leadership Foundation respondent as being from ‘benign naive leader to one who operates through influence but also with integrity’ causes uneasiness. That ‘there is an informal leadership landscape as well as a formal leadership landscape doesn’t make it bad; it just makes it other’ (LF respondent) is not how many appear to see it; rather, the behaviour that causes anxiety is blotted out. Several respondents reflected on the fact that they did not explicitly consider the legitimacy of their micropolitical actions.

Some believed that there were criteria that could be applied to judge legitimacy. The first of these concerned intent. If an action was ‘advancing a university as a public institution’ (vice-chancellor), which for this individual implied a set of values around inclusiveness, it had integrity. A second vice-chancellor believed that you check the action against an agreed set of objectives:

Where does legitimacy lie? I suspect it’s about the ends that you are pursuing and that you have a legitimate set of objectives, which are known and that the discussion that you are having, the direction that you are seeking to take with them, is part of that.
(vice-chancellor)

This was contrasted with ‘individual egoistic advancement’ – ‘the empire-building-type behaviour or the salesman-like behaviour’ (LF respondent). However, it was also recognised that separating the two was not always possible, and that what advanced the HEI might also advance the individual’s power and/or career. Bazerman and Banaji believe that ‘self-interest is automatic, viscerally compelling, and typically unconscious’⁷¹. It may be all too easy for leaders genuinely to believe that they are primarily pursuing organisational rather than individual interests, because ‘we are creative narrators of stories that tend to allow us to do what we want and that justifies what we have done. We believe our stories and thus believe that we are objective about ourselves’⁷².

This leads to a second criterion: that of honesty. A registrar reflected on the ethical issues raised when one was using micropolitics to implement a minority view:

What is the difference, I am asking myself, between strong leadership where somebody is assessing the evidence, applying their judgement, saying ‘we are going in this direction’ and showing leadership by using informal persuasion mechanisms, and where somebody is perhaps going through those same steps but indulging in manipulative micropolitics. What’s the difference?
(registrar)

The difference for this respondent was in selecting potential allies to persuade and cajole, yet communicating the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’ of action so that one’s efforts to persuade were transparent. Similarly, a second registrar believed it to be acceptable to select committee members from those known to favour a particular route, but to lay out to them honestly the parameters of any decision they might make or recommend. In both cases, whether others were misled was the ultimate arbiter of integrity.

Another criterion suggested was pragmatic: ‘legitimacy derives from whether it works or not’ (vice-chancellor). If the ultimate good was the success of the HEI in publicly accountable measures such as the National Student Survey or a national research evaluation exercise, then the actions leading to such outcomes had legitimacy. There are issues with this criterion, as with the others. First, measures of success are contested. Second, the timescale for judging the effect of actions and their success is very lengthy. One vice-chancellor made the point that it is generally five years before any substantial change can be effected by leadership. Many leaders in post for fewer than five years are engaging with the effects of their predecessor and leave a similar legacy to their successor. Only those remaining a good deal longer are still in situ when the impact of their leadership becomes apparent.

72 Tenbrunsel & Messick (2004) p225

73 Dewey (1997 [1910])

A final belief emerged: that no criteria could be applied objectively to assess the legitimacy of micropolitical behaviour. As a registrar expressed it: 'I suspect it's in the eyes of the beholder. So if you agree with me in my outcome and approach then, yes, it's legitimate. If you don't then the opposite'. Pragmatic morality has a lengthier history and a subtle philosophical basis⁷³. It does not support an 'anything goes' stance; rather, it assumes that there are no incontrovertible principles by which to gauge behaviour. York suggests pragmatist decisions are made on two bases:

1. Make the choice that gives us the optimal chances of valuable (promoting harmonious decisions by accommodating multiple perspectives) experiences in the future, and
2. Make the choice that aligns with the person we want to become⁷⁴.

However, neither of these adjudicates what degree of harmony or what kind of person without recourse to further standards.

Integrity is tested in HEIs in the same way as in all corporations. Business goals can be seen to justify behaviour, leading to 'ethical fading'⁷⁵, whereby the ethics of the decision are washed away by the importance of the anticipated business outcome. It might be assumed that it is the pressure of competition that causes such ethical fading, but Ludwig and Longenecker point out that success is as likely to lead in this direction⁷⁶.

The evidence from this group of leaders suggests that explicit consideration of the legitimacy of micropolitical behaviour is infrequent. Persistent pursuit of legitimacy is judged to equate to integrity. The importance of organisational goals can in itself sometimes be seen to justify micropolitical behaviour. Neither the data here nor anything in the literature provide a reliable method of judging positive and negative forms of micropolitics, but a greater degree of thoughtfulness and explicit discussion seems needed. There have not been the spectacular failures of integrity in HEIs that have been seen in the financial sector, for example, but the evidence presented here suggests a need for the sector to engage more explicitly with legitimacy and integrity in micropolitical behaviour.

74 York (2009) p104

75 Tenbrunsel & Messick (2004) p225

76 Ludwig & Longenecker (1993) p265

77 Ciulla (1995) p5

7. Developing micropolitical skills

The transition into a leadership role is challenging. Technical aspects of management may be grasped relatively quickly, but a Leadership Foundation respondent was struck by 'how ill prepared academics were at taking on the mantle of power in institutions'. Several respondents saw a change in the relationship with power as fundamental to taking on a leadership role: 'often it would come down to being either very uncomfortable with or not understanding or not knowing how to wear the mantle of power' (LF respondent). The uses of power are embodied in daily micropolitics.

Some of those interviewed spoke of anxieties about the impact of power on the individual. 'I mean power does corrupt; it doesn't corrupt in the obvious sense actually, it is not fiddling, it's not money' (vice-chancellor), but is rather pressure to act in ways that challenge the individual's principles. For a Leadership Foundation respondent, the 'impression that leadership advancement requires moral corruption' that she had received from numerous potential leaders was in part born out by narratives of the damage caused by destructive micropolitical behaviour. :

Micropolitics, where unregulated, if people wish to behave badly, there's a whole open space for them.... I was often working with people on the end of these sorts of things who are actually quite badly bruised and damaged by it.

Researching ethics in the business world, even before the era of banking scandals, Ciulla reflected that 'We live in a world where leaders are often morally disappointing'⁷⁷. Individuals are not likely to see themselves in this light. Equally, normative leadership texts generally do not acknowledge a wide range of behaviours but rather reflect the heroic self-narratives and positive public relations preferred by HEIs and their staff in common with other corporations. This is not likely to encourage deep reflection on micropolitical choices. The issue is not that leaders lack passion for moral ends:

I am interested in it because I think I can make a difference in terms of education. I mean that's the only interest that I have, or in advancing a university as a public institution with particular goals in terms of the research that we do... if those objectives have got integrity, then you've got a position of power in the micropolitics of what you are doing to try and achieve them
(vice-chancellor)

Or as another vice-chancellor expressed it:

The really important stuff... is not the how to: it is the why. It's the why you are doing it. Is this about, you know, my brand? Is it about me, my career? Never do it for knighthoods... Do it only because you think you are furthering something, and this is the crunch, that something has to be grounded in a wider authority structure than yourself.
(vice-chancellor)

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that, important though such intent, such passion, may be, in itself it may not be sufficient to steer leaders through the choppy waters of micropolitics, not least because so much is pursued unconsciously on the basis of instinct. Leaders may need considerable preparation and ongoing support that challenges their self-narrative. One registrar reported knowing 'people in similar and more senior positions to my own who never appear to reach the point of conscious self-reflection; they just act'. The development that this respondent had undertaken had not proved sufficiently challenging, and he believed that what was needed was to take people 'out of their comfort zone' much more and at various leadership levels, not just the most senior because, as expressed in the view of one vice-chancellor, currently 'micropolitics in the sector is weak'.

Development processes

How to develop leaders to address the use of micropolitics is the challenge. At one extreme, a vice-chancellor had found most formal courses not very helpful. Others raised concerns that programmes were inadequately challenging and that the time available was insufficient to change participants' attitudes and behaviour, rather than merely increase their confidence, particularly given the wide range of experience in some groups⁷⁸. This view depicted formal programmes as more likely to reinforce self-belief in ways that left underlying thinking and patterns of behaviour untouched, in particular the use of micropolitics.

78 Lumby & English (2009)

79 Sadan (2004) p68

Others were more optimistic about the transformational potential of programmes, but pointed out the idiosyncratic issues in addressing micropolitics. Because micropolitical behaviour was often unconscious, asking leaders to reflect on their practice was problematic. Equally, examples from HEIs were often sensitive, so case studies based on actual experience were in short supply.

Despite these difficulties, several respondents were positive about mentoring, coaching and apprenticeship approaches offering a potentially lengthier period for development, and giving greater confidentiality in tackling difficult issues. Peer networks established within programmes and exposure to leaders from other sectors were also viewed as helpful, particularly in learning about micropolitics, 'so, for example, people from the Foreign Office were there and you realised if they are going to lead, really the only tool they've got is diplomacy' (pro-vice-chancellor). The reliance on diplomacy, or influence, is likely to be just as much the case in HEIs.

Overall, there was support for offering rigorous preparation and ongoing support for micropolitical skills. One Leadership Foundation respondent felt the organisation was well placed to push further in bringing to the surface those aspects of practice about which HEI staff so often felt uneasy or uncertain or did not discuss:

I think this is about the Leadership Foundation's use of its power actually, to not engage collusively in an unspoken reality. So the fact that the Leadership Foundation has its remit means that it also has, ironically, a power to surface power.

Ultimately, 'it is a moral imperative for the Leadership Foundation to take micropolitics and power as a baseline ingredient. (LF respondent) in all development.

8. Looking forward

Key messages

A number of key messages emerge from this research.

- Micropolitics is an enduring part of HEIs, but is rarely acknowledged as such. Command and control are rejected as inappropriate and ineffective in nearly all circumstances; equally, democratic processes of group debate and decision-making are seen as often impractical by some. Micropolitical processes are the alternative.
- In contrast to those who see micropolitics as a constant, some believe in and have experienced alternative leadership practice: 'a leadership which is open, transparent and collaborative... where the under-stage wasn't so important'. (pro-vice-chancellor)
- The spectrum of attitudes to micropolitics ranges from embracing micropolitics to deep unease and concern at their legitimacy. This tension is rarely discussed. Some see micropolitics positively, as a means of engaging others, at best as fully enrolled in a path forward and at least as deterred from active resistance. Others highlight the potential of micropolitics for doing harm.
- Despite expressed abhorrence of negative micropolitical tactics such as intimidation, such behaviour persists.
- Apart from extreme behaviour, there is uncertainty and avoidance in thinking through what is acceptable micropolitical behaviour. A sincerely held commitment to their work takes centre stage and displaces conscious micropolitical judgement.
- Preparation for macropolitical work and understanding the link with micropolitics is often left late and underdeveloped.
- There are suggested links between micropolitics, gender and discrimination.
- Ethical behaviour and integrity are seen as of first importance. Leaders face daily dilemmas in balancing the exercise of power with a desire to remain 'the person they wish to be'.

Implications for action

The evidence from this group of leaders has surfaced a range of challenges for the sector.

At individual level

Leaders need to confront their use of micropolitics. In particular, the use of influence and power is bleached from many leaders' reflection on their practice. 'Power is a basic component of human agency... power is the human ability to intervene in events and make a difference'⁷⁹. The leaders interviewed aspired to be effective and ethical. If they are to be so, they need a technology of power; it is not enough for leaders to be expert in finance and resources, for example, or any other management skill, yet less than acute about the micropolitical tactics integral to leadership.

HEIs have harassment policy statements prohibiting certain behaviour such as making threats, yet the data shows that this behaviour persists. It also provides examples of individuals personally challenging such behaviour. If leadership is fundamentally about setting values, leaders need not only to engage with the spectrum of their own behaviour but to confront others who are employing unacceptable tactics. Though many leaders might insist that they do so, unacceptable behaviour goes unchallenged on many occasions.

At organisational level

Each HEI can facilitate reflection on practice and establish standards for action. Mentors and peer networks are seen as effective in helping leaders move beyond the narratives they commonly tell themselves about their actions, to delve more deeply into micropolitical choices and dilemmas. Such a focus needs to be an explicit default position in development programmes.

The justification for micropolitical choices often invokes organisational or sectoral interests as the ultimate arbiter. This sidesteps the issue of who decides what these interests are. The production and reception of evidence to decide goals are not neutral. Leadership teams could benefit from being more open amongst themselves and with others about the basis of the legitimacy of their decisions.

At national level

Leadership preparation programmes essentially build confidence⁸⁰ in a leadership persona that is distorted; that is, an identity that generally disregards or discounts the full range of leadership behaviours. The preparation, development and practice of HEI leadership needs to engage more explicitly with the nature, acquisition and effects of power and micropolitics. Study of power, influence and micropolitical strategies should constitute core content in programmes.

Preparation for macropolitics is weak. There is a complex inter-relationship between organisational micropolitics and regional/national macropolitics, relevant from early in a leadership career. Leaders need more development related to macropolitics, micropolitics and the interplay between the two. Support for engaging with macropolitics should be offered, focusing on the legitimate performance of persuasion and negotiation.

Some respondents believed that the practice of micropolitics may invoke greater discomfort in women and have a disproportionately detrimental impact on them. The literature confirms this⁸¹ and suggests that it is also true in relation to other under-represented groups, such as black and minority ethnic leaders or leaders with disabilities⁸². Consequently, development programmes should raise awareness of how socialisation and discrimination in relation to gender, ethnicity and other characteristics are related to micropolitical behaviour.

Ethnographic research is needed to unravel further the daily interchanges that are of key importance and would add to our understanding of how relationships and decisions are forged, by whom and with what implications. Though research on the technical aspects of leading HEIs, mergers, partnerships, leading sub-units or areas of activity such as teaching and learning, are valuable, they remain incomplete without knowledge of the relationships and manoeuvring that drives and shapes such processes.

Final word

Leaders have employed micropolitical strategies for millennia. Sometimes they do this consciously, but more often instinctively. Open discussion of the full range of behaviour is controversial. This paper set out to stimulate debate. It will not, of course, overturn reluctance to be open, nor eradicate those aspects of micropolitical behaviour that are illegitimate. Nevertheless, it is hoped that it may influence the efforts of individual leaders and those who support them to develop more conscious and skilled choices in crafting micropolitics in their leadership.

81 Morley (2006); Peters (2002)

82 Deem et al (2005)

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Biography

Jacky Lumby is a Professor of Education at the University of Southampton. She has taught and led in a range of educational settings and has also worked in a Training and Enterprise Council with regional responsibility for the development of leaders in both business and the public sector. She has researched and published widely on educational policy, leadership and management in the UK and internationally. Her work on leadership encompasses a range of areas, including comparative and international perspectives, and equality and diversity issues. She is concerned to explore how leaders can be supported to lead people, systems and processes that offer success to learners and staff in the context of living a life they value.

Notes

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