



The Art of How Not to Govern a University Well: Reflecting on the Role of Vice Chancellors of the Public Universities in Ghana

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Abstract

The Art of How Not to Govern a University well is an exploratory and evaluative work of the ills plaguing many universities. These ills manifest themselves mostly in misplaced use of power over colleagues. The study focuses on the expected roles of chairmen of councils, vice-chancellors and registrars. Chancellors are left out merely because their roles are ceremonial in nature and incumbents seldom delve into day to day administrative matters until and unless there is a looming crisis. The evaluation emphasizes the need for proper use of discretionary power and a commitment to work with the statutes and committees designed to mobilize the finest ideas for collective decision-making processes in universities. The work also looks at the expected qualities of these key players in the lives of universities and how a commitment to leadership by example can instill discipline and order in the intellectual, research and social engagements of universities as communities of scholars. Besides observations, the study relied on literature review (Desk study). The study concludes that, respect for senior academics and professional non-teaching staff builds teams that protect and defend internal and external intrusions into academic pursuits and autonomy. Such license promotes the search, dissemination and defense of the truth. The work stresses the usefulness of academic freedom in speaking about anything and dealing fairly, firmly and calmly with problems which have potential to malign university managers and dent the images of scholastic institutions within the international community.

Keywords: Social Engagements, Sociometric Stars and Rejects, Gerontocracies, Executive Failure, Canonization.

Introduction

This article is focused on the role of Vice Chancellors of the public universities in Ghana. The high concentration of brainy people in universities makes them very difficult organizations to manage. Although it is often expected that higher education will make people humble and tolerant of authority, the reverse is often equally also true in practice. Evidence from the universities suggests that academics are often intolerant towards one of their kind ordering them about like pupils before their head teacher. To exercise authority in a university over peers holding similar or better qualifications often poses considerable challenges to principal officers. University Managers practically often need more knowledge and better skills than those whom they manage.

This work looks at grey areas that often bother the managers of universities. It also looks at the false steps of university authorities in the hope that if these can be avoided, the pursuit of the creation and dissemination of knowledge through teaching, research, extension and service could make universities more effective and relevant in the globalized economy.

Methodology

Besides observations, the study relied on literature review (Desk study)

Literature Review and Findings

The Vice-Chancellor: The Vice-Chancellor's job is so complex that it is a wonder how many of them survive it. They are expected to have very thick skins to take in the vituperations and vilifications of their colleagues with nonchalant ease. Vice-chancellors should be able to decipher which exuberant ways of students and staff should be ignored and which should be appropriately sanctioned. In the words of Kerr and Ojo, a vice-chancellor must "be a friend of students, a colleague of faculty, a good fellow with alumni, a sound administrator with the state legislature, a friend of industry and agriculture, a persuasive diplomat with donors, a champion of education generally, a supporter of the professions, a spokesman to the press, a scholar in his own rights...." To find all or almost all these qualities in one person is often a rare human feat^{1,2}. A vice-chancellor who possesses most of these qualities and performs to the satisfaction of most stakeholders will be very close to nomination for beatification on route to canonization when called by his Maker if he or she is a Catholic. Addae-Mensah

recounts a story told by Professor Don Aitkins of Camberra University when God Himself led a welcoming party to receive the 1st Vice-Chancellor in Heaven while the 72nd Pope had been waiting for six months to have an appointment with God. The story suggests that the “sins” of vice-chancellors are so many that they are not frequent candidates for Heaven³.

The job of a vice-chancellor entails a depth of understanding the statutes, committee system and the interests of various groups within a university. As chief executive officers, they must understand that although convocation will expect clear visions and directions, they would not be dictated to without resentment. A vice-chancellor must not be soft like a banana to be bent in any direction; he or she must demonstrate sufficient firmness and courage that he is not a leader also following someone else as his leader. He or she must also not allow himself/herself to be pushed from behind instead of leading. A vice-chancellor should respect opinions from the committees if he/she expects convocation to feed him /her with ideas on challenges and the way forward. Armstrong says a vice-chancellor must figure out what to personally attend to and what to delegate in order that more time can be spent on policy formulation and implementation processes⁴. In particular, a vice-chancellor must remember that he/she is responsible to council for the day to day administration of the university and must endeavour to brief council on the finances, acquisition of properties, professorial and professorial equivalent appointments, review of statutes and have a devotion to the improvement of the conditions of service for the various constituencies of a university.

A vice-chancellor must also ensure that the reputation of a university does not suffer under his leadership. As the chief executive, a vice-chancellor must ensure quality in teaching, research and university consultancies. Among other things, a vice-chancellor must ensure that lecturers are qualified and that equipment, laboratories, libraries and lecture rooms are of high standard to promote teaching, learning and research. Chambers suggests that Vice-Chancellors must keenly watch over professors because of their proclivity “to take on more and more and complete less and less, complete it less and less well, and as they become more eminent, are less and less likely to be told their work is bad”. Furthermore, a university’s relation with neighbouring communities, quality of graduates and publications from staff should be high enough to earn the university some national and international respectability⁵. Vice-chancellors, according to Chambers should seek relevance in the communities they find themselves by ensuring that research work does not remain “unprocessed, or if processed unanalyzed, or if analyzed, not written up, or if written up not read, or if read not remembered, or if remembered not used or acted upon”. Vice-chancellors who fail to ensure these minimum demands risk the support of their academic colleagues. Stakeholders will call them names; but these names may sometimes bear deficiencies for which they may seek remedies or form alliances

to improve the conditions of service for the various constituencies⁵.

Universities are bureaucracies and not gerontocracies. A quick and decisive way to kill a university is to run it as if it is a gerontocracy; where age rather than merit is the major determinant for authority and responsibility. When this appears to happen, the young and talented see no future and may leave the organization. Older dons are certainly needed to mentor the young ones in research and consultancies, but young men with talent should not be sidelined on mere account of their youthfulness. The old need the young and the young need the old.

Chief executives who behave like “*one-man orchestras*” will realize much later that their followers have deserted them without any word. When committees cannot meet and friends cannot penetrate the steel walls between them and the chief executive, they will retreat. The retreat compels chief executives to take on more jobs personally; complaining that colleagues are not helping and colleagues also complaining that chief executives are not delegating.

The Registrar: The Registrar is expected to co-ordinate and thereby serves as the pivot around which all pursuits of the university should smoothly roll out from. The Registrar serves as the chief scribe for the Academic Board, the sub-committees of the Academic Board, the Council and its sub-committees, the Executive Committee and its sub-committees and other statutory committees established by the founding Law and Statutes. Where the Registrar is assisted by some deputies to fulfill these secretarial roles, one expects a Registrar to ensure that the quality of minutes reflects the deliberations; and that procedures and interpretations of precedents and policies are consistent and in tandem with the founding Law and Statutes. The Registrar must advise the vice-chancellor truthfully and carefully and also prepare agendas for meetings to enable the Vice-Chancellor keep the deliberations focused. A Registrar may also personally take minutes, edit others, implement decisions taken at meetings and assist the chief executive to implement his/her vision for the university. A Registrar should keep an eye on the use of the University Seal to authenticate important documents, report on vacancies arising for filling, watch for fair practices in times of admissions, promote the training of all staff categories and organize interviews for persons deserving appointment and/or promotion in a university. Above all, a good Registrar will ensure uninterrupted municipal services to ensure that deserving staff have some minimum conveniences to concentrate on research or intellectual disputations that can lead to clearer insights on existing dogmas or new discoveries.

A failure to oil the wheels of bureaucracy by an inept Registrar can impede the engagements of others and disrupt a university’s focus on efficiency and excellence in the pursuit, defence and the promotion of truth. A sure recipe to run-down a university

is to appoint registrars who do not understand the inner workings of such institutions for some other considerations other than merit.

It is important to note that because of the crucial role of a Registrar for excellent results from a university, it is expected that Search Parties will settle for candidates who have had exposure at many sections of the Registry. This becomes more crucial when the sitting vice-chancellor has not had progression from departmental headship through deanship to pro-vice-chancellorship. Daniel calls candidates for registrarship with exposure in only one area of the Registry as “one-eyed” registrars⁶.

The Role of Council Chairmen: In some countries the chairmen of university councils are called Visitors. They are not career staff of the universities they preside over. They are appointed by a government to preside over the policy making processes, appointment of top management in the universities and ensure probity, transparency and accountability. All tenured positions; professors and professorial equivalents need prior approval of council before appointments. Where the exigencies require action in order not to lose a particular candidate whose loss could cause irreparable damage to an institution, the recruitment must be reported to the council at the earliest opportunity for a ratification of the decision.

The study focused on the roles of Chairmen of Councils instead of the powers of Council itself because a Chairman who exercises powers far in excess of what is vested in his or her Council would soon see agitation from the Vice-Chancellor, the councilors and all stakeholders his actions affect.

It is worthy to note that chairmen of councils wield enormous powers in the universities. They wield considerable power on whether sitting vice-chancellors can get second terms or not. They can mobilize opinions against vice-chancellors who do not want to defer but want to be independent-minded. The powers of one university council in Ghana was put to play when Council overruled the recommendations of the Search Committee at KNUST and appointed Prof. J. S. K. Ayim over Prof. E. A. Sarpong to the position of Vice-Chancellor. Prof. Sarpong sent the matter to court and the court ruled that Council had the ultimate power to appoint any of the recommended candidates and not necessarily sticking to the order of merit presented by the Search party. At the University for Development Studies, staff watched speechlessly as the Wemah Council sent Prof. Bening, the vice-chancellor on leave in 2001, after he failed to secure a second term as a vice-chancellor. As Bening least expected to be asked to proceed on leave to pave the way for the appointment of his replacement, he appeared devastated and unprepared for such a sudden turn of events. In the recent examination malpractices unearthed by the Mfodwo Committee at Legon, the Vice-Chancellor (VC), Prof. Asenso-Okyere was sent on leave by the Chairman of Council for the involvement of his biological son in the leakage of questions.

Although the VC pleaded that he was ignorant of his son's involvement and that the vast and complex nature of the University made it impossible for him to detect malpractices, the Council as a body nevertheless endorsed the leave. Many sympathizers cited verses from the Bible that the iniquities of the fathers shall be visited on the sons but not rather the iniquities of sons upon fathers. The Mfodwo Committee which investigated the examination leakages submitted its report to a disciplinary committee – the Mensah-Bonsu Committee. The Convocation of the University subsequently became divided over the delayed release of the Mensah-Bonsu Report. The estranged Vice-Chancellor sought to return by force to work but was restrained by the Chairman of Council. Eventually, the vice-chancellor was restored and later retired to put the matter to rest.

The above examples point to a need to use power carefully and responsibly with a view to correct but not sanction in a manner that may suggest that there were hidden motives. When one can't put a finger on some direct malfeasance, then sanctions should be such that worthy men would not run from responsibility when they are approached by search parties.

Vicious Cycle of Executive Failure: When top management like vice-chancellors and registrars are too busy to spend some time with new appointees to let them know what exactly is expected of them, the new appointees soon get the feeling that any performance is good enough. Work delegated without clear instructions or effective supervision soon gets redone. It may be faster and easier for instance to rewrite a badly written speech than to attempt to edit it. When poor supervision and mentoring results in poor work being redone to performance specifications, then the failure to supervise or train subordinates results in a cycle of failures referred to as the vicious cycle of executive failure. In the service sector in which universities find themselves, a failure to meet performance expectations from employers or parents or peers can cost her a reputation earned through the sweat of earlier staff. Vice-chancellors and registrars who expect excellence from support staff but hesitate to spend money on training will fail to achieve competitive outcomes. Since good subordinates don't grow on trees but are carefully nurtured to perfection, one way to achieve excellence is to invest in human resource development so that vital skills acquired can be sharpened over time.

Roseman suggests that successful leaders need to be able to recognize performers from pretenders and drones and adapt the right strategies to motivate workers. He refers to negative behaviours that impede performance as the “six Ws”. These are withdrawing, wandering, wailing, warring, worrying and winding down. The withdrawers are those who feel alienated, neglected and rejected. The wanderers are those who feel bored, indifferent and uncommitted to anything. The wailers are those who feel hurt, complain about everything, feel unappreciated and are envious of the successes of their peers. The warring ones are workers who feel hostile and vindictive at the

workplace. The worrying ones are those who feel threatened at the workplace. Lastly, those winding down are previously hard workers who have become frustrated and despondent about everything around them. Such dead-end workers affect the morale of the more hopeful ones with time. Periodic appraisals can lead to rematches of competencies, expectations and jobs. Being able to identify mismatches and ensuring a fit between people and jobs leads not just to increased effectiveness but staff promotability⁷.

Bogue cites Walker's work that "in the real social administrative milieu, with all its complexities the person who needs a tidy administration with neat closures and a cast of clearly identified villains and heroes will not fare well". Critics of a leader may become ardent supporters when the leader's course is right⁸.

Intolerance for Dissent: Universities in general, are places where very simple matters can be made to look so complex through arguments, without the disputants resorting to blows. Intolerance for dissent or controversies heightens the resolve of academics to resist the tendency to stifle liberal discussions of ideas to distill truth from falsehoods and validity from invalidity. A man who loses his sense of self-control in the middle of an argument may be pitied, but a man who habitually jumps about, shouting hoarse at the slightest disagreement is considered a danger to be held in check by all men of reason. A good leader in a university system needs not be begged before he accepts peer advice. Subordinates do not lend a helping hand to leaders unless leaders first give indication that they are concerned about the welfare of their followers.

Servant leadership, according to Greenleaf, is what attracts subordinates in academia to show commitment. A leader who shows considerable respect for his peers and clients when he is placed above them gets so much more for his humility. The leader who does not know how to apologise, has no sense of sorrow or remorse or uses his power to suggest that he spurns the very people by whom he climbed to the top, will meet the wrath of those who helped him to climb soon enough, as surely as day follows night⁹. Cleveland suggests that chief executives of universities should promote "enough loud and cheerful arguments among members so that all possible outcomes are analysed, moral dilemmas are illuminated and the public effects are analytically examined". Some amount of dissent and laughter is good to release tension among academics periodically. Rigidity is an enemy of leadership¹⁰.

There is a great need for patience in dealing with university staff. The diversity of human expertise trying to reach common understanding on issues with only the parameters from their different professional backgrounds often leads to different conclusions from the same premises. Bogue explains the tendency for profound arguments in universities in the following differences in professional outlooks. Scientists will want an experiment and philosophers a logical argument. Lawyers will

want an adversarial hearing and theologians a reference to the scripture. Sociologists will want an opinion poll and artists a panel of judges. Engineers will want a systems study and economists a costs/benefits analysis⁸.

Most academics have come to expect and enjoy such diversity in looking at problems and look forward to such engagements. Universities are expected to create fora for such discourses to sharpen dons in their pursuits.

Subordinates of chief executives must also realize that chief executives are human and not angels. Walker points out that. "It is the work of the president to mediate and arrive at creative solutions. It is the job of a president to create an environment where dialectical change is encouraged, where people deal with one another not as scoundrels but as colleagues, and where the different interests and perspectives may be compromised in ways that resolve tension and permit action"¹¹. Walker further notes that university authorities should avoid the tendency "to assign self serving motives to others and more noble motives to themselves". The subordinate is not necessarily a bad person whenever performance does not meet expectations¹¹.

Vice-chancellors and other principal officers of universities must cultivate a sense of angelic calmness that allows for maximum participation of staff in the committee system. It is only in allowing debate that fools can be separated from those who are wise. Hedde, Brigance and Powell cite Aristotle that: "If it is a disgrace to a man who cannot defend himself in bodily form, it would be absurd not to think him disgraced if he cannot defend himself with reason in speech". We live in a verbal world; the witty and articulate as well as the dull-witted should both have their ways for industrial peace. This is one scourge of democracy¹².

It is important for leaders to remember that performers always make mistakes because their levels of assignments match their capabilities. When subordinates are not making mistakes, then they have been assigned tasks far below their capabilities and are not feeling challenged on the job. As the Peter Principle teaches us: "Every man rises to his level of incompetence" Peter. Every coach also needs a coach periodically. Truthfully, managing intellectuals is like looking after ducks; it is very difficult to get them move in one direction. The manner in which appointments, assignments, rewards and sanctions are used can make or unmake an unsuspecting leadership through scathing criticisms¹³.

Not Knowing Who Knows What: Not knowing who knows what can be very costly to any Vice-Chancellor or Registrar. Knowing who knows what is helpful in recommending staff for committees and commissions outside a university. The exposure is helpful in building the confidence, reputation and networks of those who get noticed. There is need, therefore, to constantly peruse the curriculum vitae of staff to recall their areas of expertise for both internal and external assignments.

A curriculum vitae database shows at a glance all the available human resource capabilities. Using the CV as the first port of call is not only objective but makes a chief executive a Theory Y manager. The Theory Y manager views the positive sides of staff, believing that the negative sides are due to environmental influence. University politics, in the main, is majoritarian politics as positions such as deanship, vice-deanship and pro-vice-chancellor are by elections. Since controversial matters at the committee level are frequently decided by the vote, it is important who gets elected to what committee or position.

Lank observes that knowing subordinates well prevents misassignments, putting incompatibles into one team, overloading a few people and mismatching persons and tasks by the taskmaster. People who habitually perceive their way of doing things as the only best way (persistent personal programmers) run down universities because they show no confidence in the collegial decision-making system. A leader who does not trust any subordinate will realize rather too late that no subordinate too trusts him¹⁴.

To be able to motivate most subordinates well, one must know their anxieties, needs and expectations. It is only then that strategies to meet these can be worked upon for increased productivity. As a satisfied need does not motivate, concern for people and results should lead managers to the hopes and aspirations of subordinates. Hampton, Summer and Webber cite the work of Kerr that: "Whether dealing with monkeys, rats or human beings, it is hardly controversial to state that most organisms seek information concerning what activities are rewarded and the seek to do (or at least pretend to do) these things, often to the virtual exclusion of the activities not rewarded". To motivate a subordinate, you must know him so well to deal with the issues which impede his giving off his best. Life-long learning continually raises the talents and performance of subordinates to available jobs for the best results¹⁵.

Misuse of Discretionary Powers: Chief executives of universities have considerable discretionary powers. The learned community of peers expects that chief executives will always exercise this discretion cautiously. In particular, it is expected that vice-chancellors will use their powers to recruit and promote judiciously. It is also expected that they would be gender sensitive, just and averse to playing the ethnic card in all their endeavours. Universities expect nothing short of merit in appointments of staff and admission of students to various programmes. If a vice-chancellor vacillates in the interpretation of rules and application of sanctions, this shall earn him some resentment; he will see the rough sides of some tongues. Vice-chancellors who discriminate will before long be on a collision course with moralists who have their sights on everything and everybody accept themselves.

The leadership of any university that wants industrial peace must also not ignore the concerns and demands of unionized

constituencies in the university. The quality of graduates and research publications being among the products of a university, extreme care must be attached to teaching, learning, examinations and publications to protect the reputation, integrity of lecturers and the dignity of her graduates and promotees. Daniel cites Kwapong as saying that, the production of "illiterate graduates" should not be countenanced. Similarly, staff should be recruited only to complete approved staffing establishments. Recruitments perceived to be hand-outs to ethnic snoopers will eventually disable CEOs from embarking on moral crusades to stamp discipline at intervals. A situation where due diligence cannot place a finger on what several staff do for their wages and where they work; plain cases of sponsored malignant vagrancy will eventually ruin any determined university authority. When bigotry, flattery and sycophancy are tolerated, they breed their types ceaselessly to the point where perpetrators undercut each other and taste the filthy brews they have in the past administered to others to promote their selfish interests⁶.

To run a university well demands a commitment to the truth, exercise of due diligence and a refrain from the manipulation of workers through half-truths and divide-and-rule tactics. The huge numbers of exuberant youth now massed up at the universities in Ghana because of pre-tertiary reforms make the clarion call of Mintzberg for interpersonal, informational and decisional skills very instructive. The duty to lobby for funds, equipment and a positive presentation of ongoing engagements also demands communicating with governments, politicians, media and internal and external publics as stakeholders. As a community of scholars involved in knowing and defending the truth, universities frown upon dishonest disclosures or deliberate manipulation of facts for selfish ends. A selfless chief executive should seek to expand the area where most of what he knows is also known by the constituencies he deals with. He must have no pretences about allowing his peers know him well to reduce any facades; the staff will be helpful by disclosing his inadequacies to reduce blind spots for him which wait as traps for him. A forthright chief executive will strive to reduce the area of the unknown between him and his constituencies and not engage in deceit and pretences to make himself appear like a mystical figure from some other planet on this earth. This is what Joseph Luft and Harry Ingram sought to portray in what has come to be known as the JOHARI window¹⁶.

Daniel suggests rather humorously that a chief executive of a university should not only be capable of giving "unflinching support" but "flinching support" occasionally to all stakeholders without a sense of remorse depending on what is at stake. Diplomacy is a useful management tool⁶.

The Socializing Function: Of all the multiple attributes of an effective vice-chancellor, one that touches the hearts of any community of scholars is the role of a father-figure in the university. A vice-chancellor's inadequacies in other areas may be excusable, but those expected of him with regard to social

occasions are noticed and recalled as mortal “sins” whenever trouble begins to brew during his tenure.

The community of scholars can forgive a chief executive who fails to join them on joyous occasions such as naming ceremonies, outdoorings, anniversaries and marriages. But a vice-chancellor or Registrar’s absence from events like wake keepings, final funeral rites and burial ceremonies are noticed and interpreted as lack of concern for the staff who toil for them. The matter is considered grievous if in spite of specially designed cards for the functions, no verbal apologies are forthcoming for their inability to honour them. Modesty is the rule. Some invitations should be accepted and some should be rejected on account of equally important national engagements. Achebe refers to this exercise of judgment that: “The man who answers every summons of the town crier will not plant his field”. Achebe again recalls an Igbo proverb that; “If you cross the great river to marry a wife, you must be ready for the risk of night journey by canoe”. The demands of the office of vice-chancellor and registrar should not come as surprises to them. The article is to refresh their memories and not say anything most of them will be hearing for the first time. It is worthy to note that chief executives also come in different forms¹⁷. Drucker said, among the effective executives, there are extroverts and aloof, retiring men, some even morbidly shy. Some are eccentrics, some painfully correct conformists. Some are fat and some are lean. Some are worriers and some are relaxed. Some drink quite heavily and some are total abstainers. Some are men of warmth; some have no more personality than a frozen mackerel. Some are scholars and serious students, others almost unlettered. Some have broad interests; others know nothing except their narrow area and care for little else. Some of them are self-centred, if not indeed selfish. But there are also some who are generous of heart and mind. These are men who live only for their work, and others whose main interests lie outside¹⁸.

In almost every organization, universities inclusive, there are very popular people whom association with brings tremendous goodwill to a leader. These are the sociometric stars of every organization. There are further also some people nobody wants to associate with in any organization. These are the sociometric rejects. The latter group of staff may nevertheless have special expertise that could be tapped by an observant leader. The mark of a great leader is to recognize the potential of such least preferred workers and log-on to their strengths for the health of any university. Avoiding such people may lead such deviants turning their mischievous ways on unsuspecting chief executives.

Conclusion

The study discussed the attributes of vice-chancellors, the roles of the chairmen of councils, vice-chancellors and registrars as well as the expectations of the major constituencies of universities with regard to their welfare. The work also

examined the benefits of knowing the areas of expertise of subordinates, the folly of poor instruction and supervision by chief executives resulting in executive failure, the intolerance of leaders to voices of dissent and the importance of treating equals as equals.

Attention to social functions by principal officers is perceived as sensitivity to community concerns; these bring in considerable goodwill to university leaders who engage in them. The work points out that flattery and sycophancy decisively wreak havoc when the perpetrators themselves eventually become victims of their evil ways. The best way of running a university is to eschew the ways that break-up teams, encourage the pursuit of truth, proper use of discretion and honest disclosure of facts to the various constituencies that exist. Managing intellectuals is not like issuing out directives to ordinary folks who are psychologically tuned to obey, even if grudgingly, the authorities they find above them. Avoidance of the pitfalls mentioned may not win the game for managements of universities, but the presence of most of these pitfalls will surely bring some leaderships to their knees in more ways than many can anticipate.

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