Conceptualising leadership and emotions in higher education: wellbeing as wholeness

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Abstract: In this conceptual article the authors outline an approach to leadership in higher education that foregrounds attention to wholeness and wellbeing, framing emotion as inherent to the practice of leadership rather than separate from it, with all organizing actions inseparable from and influenced by emotion. The article is developed from their research on wellbeing for school leaders that was framed within findings from positive organizational scholarship that intentionally foregrounds virtues and positive human capacities as essential and vital to thriving for individuals and groups in organizations. The authors reflect on the benefits and potentials of re-orienting leadership in higher education toward attending to the more life-giving qualities of work in higher education, and suggest that this generative reflection may serve to counter the predominant stances of competition and scarcity-mindsets that seem to pervade academia. Leaders' purposeful attention to emotions, such as encouraged through positive models of leadership, can create conditions that highlight and re-frame academic work toward thriving within the realities of university work-worlds that can be competitive, stressful, and challenging. This positive organizational stance toward leadership in higher education is timely given the increasing focus on encouraging wellbeing among administrators at all levels of the education system.

Leadership entails influencing others to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2019). Across various contexts and expressions of goals, formal leaders and managers have influence on the emotional climate and wellbeing in their workplaces (Gardner, Fisher, and Hunt 2009; Johnson and Spector 2007). Following on from Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on emotional labour, much has been written about leadership and emotion in the workplace (Ashkanasy, Härtel, and Zerbe 2000; Brief and Weiss 2002; Fineman 2003). In education settings, significance of emotions for leadership endeavours has been emphasized within higher education (Bryman 2007; Coates and Anderson 2007) and schools (Author 2009, 2015). Furthermore, there has been wide interest in the psychological concept of emotional intelligence (EI) and its application to leadership and organizational studies (Bar-On 1997; Salovey and Mayer 1990, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee 2002). Ashkanasy and Dasborough (2003) argued that emotions are necessary in the understanding of organizations and in leadership development and training.

As Denzin (1984, 2) argued, "emotions cut to the core of people. Within and through emotion, people come to define the surface and essential, or core, meanings of who they are." There are many definitions of emotion, from biological responses to environmental stimuli to the deeply analytic (e.g., Jungian description of emotions). Although one cannot 'know' what people are feeling inside, emotion serves as a signalling mechanism for leaders and followers to adapt behaviour when they encounter specific environmental conditions (Ashkanasy and Dorris 2017; Plutchik and Kellerma 2013). Emotions are distinguishable from the "closely related" concept of mood because emotions are shorter and generally more intense (Salovey and Mayer 1990, 185). If we view emotion as the centre of personal understanding of self and the key to understanding others, then the context within which the emotion takes places is important (Fineman 2010).

Reciprocally, social context and relationships determine individuals' behaviours and emotions (Baldwin and Fergusson 2001).

How emotions are embodied in personal practice is important because relationships are quite literally at the *heart of* education (Sergiovanni 2003). The importance of emotions is as true for higher education as it is among other sectors of education. Within higher education, Vandervoort (2006) stressed the need for improvement of working relationships through better intrapersonal and interpersonal skills between administrative leaders and faculty. The university setting is one where leaders' relationships to students, staff, and the wider educational environment often contend with a growing climate of managerialism (Billot 2010). In addition, leaders in higher education are often appointed with no, or limited, preparatory leadership training or professional development for their role mandates and these appointees are expected to learn on the job (Fielden 2009). Ornstein and Nelson (2006) noted that EI is predicated on the understanding that emotions act as a driving force for motivation and predicts increased effectiveness in the workplace. We contend that for leaders in higher education understanding emotion, being self-aware, and interpreting social interactions should not just be seen as a competence, but become a integral lens through which to view leadership. As a result, emotional intelligence can contribute to success (Van der Zee, Thijs, and Schakel (2002) and promote well-being (Bar-On (2005). Yet, Gonzales and Rincones (2013) noted that references to emotion are limited in educational administration (and leadership) literature. Therefore, framing emotion as inherent to the practice of leadership (viewed in broad and encompassing terms), rather than separate from it, is critical in higher education.

Through our research on leadership and wellbeing in schools (Authors 2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b), we have noted the benefits of paying attention to the role of emotions in

leadership as a catalyst for cultivating conditions of flourishing organizations. We found that a sense of flourishing in schools was related to positive emotions which stemmed from belonging to a team of caring colleagues, enjoying the connections with colleagues at work, and collaborative climate that fostered and supported innovation and risk-taking (Authors, in press). All of these experiences were balanced with negative emotions that had resulted from dealing with stress, challenges, frustrations, disappointments, and being overwhelmed (Authors 2018a). Central to the descriptions of flourishing in schools was the important place of the leader who helped to create conditions for teachers to feel a sense of belonging, appreciation, affirmation of their contributions, and an awareness of these for others on the staff. We recognize that these work experiences were described from the perspective of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools and are not generalizable across all educational work contexts. However, we make the case that these findings affirm empirical research in positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship, where paying attention to the ways we experience positive relationships and emotions, meaning, achievement in work and life can lead to a sense of flourishing (Cameron and Dutton 2003; Fredrickson 2005; Seligman 2009).

In this conceptual article, we suggest that by capitalizing on the human desire for wellbeing at work, faculty in higher education can learn to attend to and craft one's work from a strengths-based, appreciative and positive perspective, and that leadership plays a central role in creating conditions for this to happen more often. As argued by Morrill (2007), leaders in the realm of higher education should possess positive leadership attributes. While only modest considerations have been given to positive leadership and wellbeing in higher education thus far (Harward 2016), we suggest that a recalibration or mind shift in our approaches to leadership in higher education would entail collaboration and the development of leaderful learning

communities which are underpinned by academic rigour and humanity. These shifts offer new opportunities for engaging academics and university leaders in the creation of academic environments and relationships of wellbeing for sustainable flourishing.

Faculty Wellbeing in Higher Education: Attending to Emotions

Higher education leadership is often situated within the realities of academic work worlds that are experienced as competitive, stressful, and challenging. Academic leaders have a major role to fulfill within the administrative domain, including management of complex situations and stakeholders through effective planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Coco 2011). Berg and Seeber (2016) noted the growing sense of un-wellness that they had recognized in themselves and in the statistics among Canadian academics, as they described their idea and ideal of "the slow professor." They named the creeping feeling that they had of being unwell, overwhelmed, and exhausted at the seeming endlessness of academic work in a culture of hyper-competition academic malaise. Berg and Seeber's "slow professor manifesto" aimed at resisting the neo-liberal, managerialist policies and structures that they, with others, perceived to have become the norm in universities worldwide (Ball 2012, Collini 2012). As academics, we have also experienced this sense of malaise, of never knowing if we were doing enough and knowing that there was always much, much more that could be done. In some instances, we have relied on defense mechanisms such as putting on our masks, feigning competence, and stoically putting our heads down to pull the weight of the work and push through.

Adding to the stress and depletion in work cultures in higher education is the seeming lack of collegiality and collaboration—two aspects of academic work that can add richness and enjoyment, but that require time, attention and relationships (Berg and Seeber 2016; Palmer and Zajonc 2010). As we work less and less together, we work less and less well together. As more

of us maintain work routines that leave us feeling stressed out, overwhelmed, and on edges of dis-ease, the less we tend to seek out one another for contact, communication, or comfort. We become groups of individuals working alone and trying to do too much. As the distance between our desires for an academic life—including hard work and challenges with the exclusion of thinking times, planning times, and creating times—and the increase of managerialist drivers, isolate work patterns, and workplace dissonance, we can find our wellbeing steadily decreasing (Berg and Seeber 2016). As Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) suggested, the inconsistency between the work role demands and one's normative expectations for emotional labour result in negative impact on wellbeing.

We suggest that mindful and purposeful attention to wellbeing in and through higher education leadership offers a response to the growing body of writing on frustration, stress, and burnout across all aspects and sectors of education (Johnson and Spector 2007; Little, Simmons, and Nelson 2007; Greenberg, Brown, and Abenavoli 2016). In addition, this perspective is pivotal given that higher education leaders are mandated by roles to anticipate and effectively address the ever-increasing and wide-ranging crisis situations (Gigliotti 2016). Purposeful attention to emotional leadership can highlight and re-frame academic work toward thriving within the realities of academic work worlds that so often are experienced as competitive, stressful, and challenging. We suggest that conceiving of higher education leadership in a way that promotes, supports and orients the work lives of all faculty and staff members toward flourishing through rethinking emotions and leadership. According to Stein, Trabasso and Liwag (2000, 439) such emotion-attended understanding describes and focuses on the personal significance and meaning of events experienced in everyday interaction. People continually monitor and appraise the state of their world in an effort to detect changes in the status of

personally significant goals. One of our core assumptions is that memory of an emotional event is a function of how the event was understood as it occurred. When looking at the connectedness of emotion and leadership, it is the focus on emotional understanding, which is the most important. Those in leadership positions are right at the interface of understanding, where their inherent emotions meet the social context.

At the same time, it is wise to bear in mind Fineman's (2010, 24) caveat that events "are themselves neither problematized nor deconstructed as part of a wider ethical, value or control system. Emotion is more an inside-out affair than outside-in." Understanding what works well in the work lives of higher education professionals can build on a research base of positive organizational knowledge and flourishing practices. Studies on emotions in educational leadership (Author 2009, 2015) have often encouraged and promoted a caring, reflective, holistic and collaborative approach to leading (Branson 2009; Palmer and Zajonc 2010; Smylie, Murphy and Seashore 2016; Woods and Roberts 2018). These perspectives are confirmed by related strength-based and appreciative research from positive organizational scholarship (Dutton and Ragins 2009, Lillius et al. 2009, Worline and Dutton 2017).

Strengths-based, Appreciative, and Positive Perspectives

Flourishing perspectives draw from the positive organizational scholarship and positive psychology; two fields of study that focus on the goodness, virtuousness, resilience and other positive traits, as opposed to finding and fixing the deficits or weaknesses in organizations, groups and individuals (Ben Shahar 2008; Cameron 2012; Carr 2004; Roberts and Dutton 2010). Attention to flourishing does not deny the realities of challenges or difficulties inherent in life and work; nor does this approach turn away from suffering or stories of pain that emerge in all systems that are designed and lived out by and with humans. Additionally, this perspective does

not require individual faculty members or leaders to be superficially optimistic nor naively positive. Rather we acknowledge that in higher education work, as in life, there are diverse experiences from suffering and languishing to thriving and celebrating. For example, there are also diverse mediating personalities that range from optimistic to pessimistic, for example. The findings from the positive sciences emphasize that within all human experiences and personalities there are opportunities to respond and adapt to the realities of our lives in different ways. Further, we have the capacity to experience our work lives in multiple ways and, because these are within our realm of control, we can adapt them toward what provides us with a sense of flourishing (McGonigal 2016, Seligman 2009).

Wheatley (2017) argued that there are many filters, or ways of seeing the world, and that we can notice our own filters when we pay attention to who we are, what matters most to us, and to what triggers us; these can help us determine a clearer way forward. We can choose to work in ways that move us in the direction of our values, even when we may not see those values reflected by others in our work or life communities. We argue that it is important for formal leaders to exert influence through overtly framing conversations, experiences, meetings, and events from a filter that gives emphasis to flourishing in higher education work contexts. Choosing to notice and, with intention, describe to others the life-giving, energizing, and purpose-aligned opportunities in our work are catalysts for others to do the same will bring about what Cameron (2008) described as a virtuous cycle in organizational cultures. Intentional focus on flourishing matters for the recognition and realization of wellbeing as a dimension of the greater purpose of higher education and to the wholeness of those participating (Harward 2016).

As a way of intentionally shifting to attending to what goes well and what makes higher education institutions flourish, we suggest the use of an appreciative inquiry approach.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach to change wherein one shifts understanding in a fashion that thinks of higher education organizations as living systems (Cooperrider and Shrivasta1987; Dickerson 2012; Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010). This approach has become an established process for positive change in organizations (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2010). Cooperrider and Godwin (2010, 19) stated:

> AI involves systematic discovery of everything that gives 'life' to a living system when it is most effective, alive, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a very artful and disciplined way, the craft of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential.

In our experience of higher education leadership, there has been a tendency to focus on the causes of problems and the pursuit of means to quench or ameliorate these causes. When the deficit-based approach is used, leaders give strict attention and energy to pathologies, which inevitably produces cultures of defensiveness, emotional negativity, and low tolerances for creativity and risk. An appreciative leader's approach asks: What is working? How might we get more of this? and What might success look like? In our research, we have noticed that people are inspired to live and work into their preferred futures by imagination, warranted hope and acknowledged emotions; that rational-technical problem-solving is efficacious when socio-emotional resistance, fears, or struggling are first displaced, reduced or replaced. Or course, we recognize the importance of a holistic perspective on leading with emotions, where leaders do not act in a vacuum and attention to the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and diversity aspects of leadership are necessary.

Leading with Emotions for Wholeness in Higher Education

As higher education leaders learn to notice and nurture flourishing in themselves and others, as part and function of their roles and as a means of influence on their work cultures, there is a consequential turn to growth, improvement and workplace engagement. Schaufeli et al. (2002, 74) suggested that work engagement might be seen as "a positive fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption." Similarly, Kahn (1992) suggested that engagement is a state of mind; whereby, faculty display behaviours that are consistent with the conversion of high energy into aspects of job performance (physical, cognitive, and emotional). Gruman and Saks (2011) saw engagement as a situation where faculty and staff members display emotional connectedness with fellow employees, cognitive valiance, and a high degree of passion for work. According to Gruman and Saks (2011), the following elements affect an employee's personal engagement: meaningfulness of work, psychological safety, and psychological availability. Through engagement, leaders are able to inspire and guide others in an organization. Parrish (2015) viewed this as an important trait of emotional intelligence, through which higher education leadership positively influence, motivate and direct others to achieve to their full potential and thus meet the needs of the institution and situation or circumstance.

Nillson and Paddock (2014) described the work of paying attention to the emotional experiences at work as 'inscaping.' Borrowed from poetry roots, where the term referred to the invisible structures or essences of things, these authors used the term to refer to the essentiality of interior experiences as integral to understanding exterior experiences, such as social innovations in organizations. They wrote, "we define organizational inscaping as the practice of surfacing the inner experiences of organizational members during the normal course of everyday

work. By 'inner experiences,' we don't mean just emotions. We mean everything that makes up our inner lives: ideas and intuitions, aspirations and fears, values and memories" (2014, 46). As Nillson and Paddock (2014) suggested, inscaping in an organization can infuse the system with life-giving energies and supports for a fully human experience, and this generativity leads to new thinking, new ways of connecting, and new ways of engaging together toward a common purpose. They described:

> Work inscaping brings energy and creativity to an organization. As people gain the freedom to express the hopes, fears, questions, and concerns that they have about their work, the space for divergent thinking expands around them. What's more, because work inscaping fosters unusually frank relationships, people develop a nuanced and appreciative understanding of each other. This understanding allows them to move together through difficult new terrain in a way that accommodates their specific strengths and flaws. (2014, 50)

Inscaping creates spaces for sharing inner experiences about what matters most to us and can cultivate exterior conditions for shifting toward new learning and innovation "as the positive energies and diverse experiences and views combine toward new ways of thinking and being together, essentially toward transformation" (Nillson and Paddock 2014, 52).

Effective higher education leaders know how to manage their emotions and the emotions of others (Herbst 2007). Similarly, Modassir and Singh (2008) found that leaders who develop their EI skills of relationship management and key social awareness, could develop sincerity and helpfulness among their followers. Leaders' expressions of positive emotions have been found to have a positive impact on groups (Bono and Ilies 2006) and to motivate and inspire followers through the contagion process (Groves 2006) and also to foster collegiality. According to

Gonzales and Terosky (2016), colleagueship (collegiality) has been attributed to the improvement of results in areas such as teaching delivery, research opportunities, and career management. Su and Baird (2017) suggested that post-secondary institutions promote and implement collegial practices. The rationale for the recommendation is the positive outcomes found in literature of collegial practices in academic departments. These positive outcomes include organizational improvement results in teaching, efficacy, and trust (Shah 2012; Gonzales and Rincones 2013). Ayo and Fraser (2008, 57) claimed, "the most significant resource and expense in HE lies with the institution's staff and their collective ability to support one another in transformative learning."

In our research, we engaged with groups of educators who operated at a different level of energy, enthusiasm, and innovation in their work; and, they credited that vitality to the opportunities afforded educators to share the wholeness of themselves as part of the work they do together in the schools. For these groups, cultivating genuine and meaningful human relationships had led to growing the conditions necessary for them to innovate together in their work (Authors 2018). In educational settings, Jarzabkowski (2002) acknowledged the importance of professional relationships and interactions among colleagues and suggested that collegiality also incorporates a social and emotional dimension. She argued that while the professional activities are largely geared towards the rational and instrumentalist goals of the organization, the social dimension advances and nurtures the personal relationships among colleagues, which may positively impact both organizational and personal goals such as developing a preferred culture. Collaboration in higher education leadership has also been emphasized. Exhibiting positive leadership, constructive communication, and cooperative collaboration appears to be vital to a higher education leader's long-term satisfaction and success

(Coco 2011). Similarly, Gonzales and Terosky (2016) found that colleagueship had five functions in higher education context: (1) the improvement of teaching; (2) extending disciplinary learning, often through interdisciplinary connections: (3) securing faculty research agendas; (4) career management; and (5) friendship. Engaging authentically and holistically in teaching, research, and service in higher education reflects the value of relationships at work, the importance of attending to the inner landscape of our lives as essential to our work, and the potential and promises of appreciative and positive approaches and perspectives at work. These values resonate with writing and research that highlight the importance of work as an opportunity for fuller human development (Palmer and Zajonc 2010).

Many stories and descriptions of flourishing in our research recounted moments of connections as part of a staff whose members care deeply about each other and their awareness of the importance of the work they do for their students and colleagues. Beyond a sense of collegiality, stories of collaborating with others to provide engaging and meaningful learning for their students were readily shared. Professional interactions with their colleagues were cherished. The stories of flourishing were also linked to a sense of professional autonomy, of feeling valued for their experience and wisdom as a teacher, and a feeling that they are trusted to make the best choices and decisions for their students (Authors 2016). For some, this sense of autonomy was also linked to a feeling of freedom to take risks in their teaching for the sake of improving student learning, to work outside the box towards improving student engagement in learning. For these educators, this autonomy to innovate in their teaching was integral to what it meant to them to flourish in their work (Authors 2018b). Various stories of commitment, love, and care for their students, their colleagues, and for their communities reflect our research findings that experiencing genuine care, concern, and friendship from others at work more generally are key

indicators of work satisfaction or happiness (Helliwell 2006).

Academia is a particular work environment that can offer autonomy, collaboration, creativity as faculty build teaching, research, and service portfolios that create the container within which faculty carry out their work. This work container can also feel quite managed and constrained when the academic values and ideals appear to be marginalized or sacrificed for exogenous and other institutional demands that may not seem to be aligned with teaching, learning, and research goals. Workplace stress for educators often occurs as a sense of autonomy decreases with the increase of workplace demands that do not seem to be supported with sufficient or appropriate resources (Acton and Glasgow 2015; Greenberg, Brown and Abenovali 2016). Leaders who scored higher on managing emotions in themselves and others (i.e., have higher emotional intelligence) were able to engage in higher quality social interactions and less conflictual relationships with others (Lopes, Salovey, Côté, Beers, and Petty 2005)

Attention to our emotions and the ways we work individually and together can offer insights into how we might exert our agency within our roles, crafting conditions for flourishing for ourselves and for others. While we suggest that individual and collective agency for noticing, nurturing, and sustaining wellbeing is a reasonable responsibility for leaders and those working within higher education, these systems ought to assign the responsibility for facilitating and focusing on wellbeing as highly important functions (Acton and Glasgow 2015; Greenberg, Brown and Abenovali 2016,). Wellbeing often plays out in the liminal spaces between us, in our relationships, interactions, and expectations, in our common goals, hopes, and dreams. Wellbeing is an individual and an organizational quality (Greenberg et al. 2016) that can be animated through leadership.

Leadership for shifting unhelpful habits to increased wellbeing at work for self and others is a critical function all constituents in high education settings. For each of us to be well, we need to live and work in systems that value wellbeing for all; where there is a sense of humanness that values and encourages wholeness, aliveness, meaningfulness, belongingness, and many other qualities and traits. Positive leadership for wellbeing may provide opportunity to create conditions for agency and involvement, for voice and choice, for respect and kindness all within high expectations for academic work that meets agreed upon criteria in terms of amount and quality in research, teaching, and service. Positive leaders create spaces and opportunities for faculty to notice, speak to, and shift away from the structures and processes that reward individualism, hyper-competitivism, and incivility towards colleagues in the name of academia, collegial governance, and collective agreement. One of the challenges of addressing subjective experiences, such as wellbeing, is that there is no one way of defining or describing the construct nor its associated sources and processes. Beyond the implications of diversity among personal preferences and personalities for how we experience wellbeing (Lyubomirsky, 2006), there are bias and privilege differentials in all workplaces that make it difficult for some to experience wellbeing in ways that others might. With the societal lenses turned toward addressing implicit bias and discrimination, we also recognize the importance for ongoing examination of how workplaces can be equitable and inclusive spaces for all aspects of work life, including opportunities to experience wellbeing.

Attention to the constraints and barriers within the system that minimize and negate opportunities for some while maintaining opportunities for others is critical leadership work. We suggest that this work can include attention to fostering and maintaining structures that also engaging a sense of respect, equity, justice, compassion, kindness, consideration, among many

other positive traits and qualities that we can extend to ourselves and each other in our work. Palmer's (2007, 2) writing on the importance of, and the vital need for, authenticity, integrity, and identity as educators resonates deeply with us. This is especially expressed by his notion that "we teach who we are," and this is linked to leadership. Positive leadership is about seeing self and others in thoughtful, open, and real ways; so that we come to see each other as humans on a learning journey, each of us with much potential and great offerings, but also with many flaws and challenges. This mutual seeing can become a space of learning, if there is a relational grace (Palmer 2004) extended to each other through compassion and trust such that we grow together. This is also reflected in Whiteheads' living theory approach to education (1989), which starts from the aim of improving practice by noticing educational influences that shape and contribute to who we are and who we want to be educators. In a living theory approach to leading, we ask how we can improve our practice and contribute to growing love and humanity within and around us. The inquiry is initiated from with/in, but inevitably leads to engaging with others to understand ourselves and our influences in and on the larger community (Whitehead 2009).

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we have assumed that leaders in higher education have a role to play in the living ecosystem of the social constructed workplaces of faculty, staff and students. We have emphasized the human side of the sector and offered that the emotional dimension of humans being who they are must become a primary focus for those seeking to foster conditions for flourishing in higher education. While there may be a propensity to privilege the mind and capacities of rationality and problem solving, amidst the tremendous transformations and tensions in this sector, we offer that attention to positivity, emotion and engaging with others in ways that enlivens a sense of belonging, appreciation, and meaningfulness at work is likely to

account for our greatest prospects for nurturing and sustaining wellbeing and collective flourishing. This is especially pertinent in the times of crises and unprecedented changes, which can bring about the worst of emotional labour resulting in stress, burnout, despair, depression, and decreased mental health. As we finish this writing, we are each impacted by the challenges, stressors and lingering fears and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that has brought a mandated shift in higher education working environments to move entirely online. This sudden and broad move to remote work and online engagement with colleagues at a time of crisis serves as an important reminder that studies of leadership and emotions in higher education should include inquiry into leading on and through online environments. Additionally, the resurgence societal movements in response to the crisis of ongoing evidence of systemic racism and biases requires an attention in research and practice to ensuring that equity and inclusion have a central place in any model or theory of wellbeing at work. Finally, we have suggested that leadership in academia can create conditions in their work cultures that shift toward wellbeing of whole persons, even during these times of hyper-managerialism and neo-liberal demands. While these shifts may not offer the necessary large-scale changes to our systems, these do offer small-scale changes that make a difference for the people with whom they work and serve.

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