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## **Reflections about Leadership in Higher Education: A Chilean Case**

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### **Abstract**

In this article we present the reflections of the first author in relation to her experience in different leadership positions in higher education in Chile. We explore her 12 years of university leadership experience through the lens of significant activities and responsibilities in each of the positions she held, the main challenges encountered, lessons learned, and topics that can and should be addressed in leadership development programs. Based on these reflections, recommendations are made for successful leadership in higher education and topics for leadership development programs are identified.

**Keywords:** leadership; higher education; university administration; leadership development programs

## Introduction

In this article we present the reflections of the first author, Fernanda, in relation to her experience in different leadership positions in higher education in Chile. After 12 years in various leadership positions, Fernanda joined the *International Study of Leadership Development in Higher Education* (ISLDHE) project, which prompted her to analyze her own leadership experiences in a more critical and reflective way. Through this analysis, she realized all she had learned was experiential, and in identifying the missteps she had made it highlighted how useful it would have been to have access to leadership development opportunities to avoid the pitfalls, to have been more effective in various situations, and to have enabled her leadership roles to be less stressful. We posit that Fernanda's reflections may be useful to aspiring and novice universities leaders by highlighting ways to avoid some of the common pitfalls and to gain insights from the "hard-learned lessons" based on Fernanda's experiences. We presented this reflection in a chronological approach, as it enables the reader to determine what Fernanda learned in one position was important in her next leadership role, which was particularly important as each subsequent leadership role was increasingly more complex. This is particularly important, as it allows us to realize that many of the mistakes made could have been avoided through leadership development preparation and development programs. Given that university leadership is largely influenced by the context, we have included a brief description of Fernanda's organization – the University of Santiago of Chile – where she was a leader.

## The Context

### Some Milestones of the Chilean Higher Education System

The Chilean higher education system has undergone important changes associated with the different political milestones of the country. The dictatorship installed in Chile by Augusto Pinochet<sup>1</sup> dismembered public universities, reduced, to the point of practically eliminating, financing for universities and surrendered education to the market. Likewise, it prohibited democratic practices within the universities, applied all kinds of censorship, and appointed the military as rectors of public universities. The neoliberal model that was installed in Chile in this period also included the university system. In this way, more than a hundred private universities were created, which responded to market logic. These universities spent

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1973 and 1990, Chile was under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet who came to power after a coup d'état, supported by the United States to overthrow the democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende. During the Pinochet dictatorship, human rights were systematically violated and his regime was one of incredible brutality. Within the higher education sector, public universities were dismembered and administered by the military. In this period academics were ousted (or murdered as dissidents), careers were disrupted, curricula were modified; likewise, laws and regulations were created that governed the universities and that gave considerable power to rectors (the head of the university). Unfortunately, most of these regulations are still in force to this day even though Pinochet's regime was dissolved and Chilean society has been active in retracting many of Pinochet's policies.

significant sums of money on marketing to attract students who, in most cases, went into debt to pay for their studies. Furthermore, in the complete absence of quality assurance systems and regulations, many of the educational programs were of very poor quality. This caused an increase in the coverage of higher education, however, the quality of the education received by the students was, in many cases, very bad, even in some cases, the universities closed, leaving the students with their studies incomplete. In addition, this was accompanied by a significant rise in student debt.

With the return to democracy in 1990, the first quality assurance systems were installed in the country, and new financing mechanisms were generated for students. However, the neoliberal system, protected by the 1980 Constitution -which establishes a subsidiary state and not a guarantor of rights - was entrenched in the country (and still is), thus higher education continues to be surrendered to the market. Private spending on higher education far exceeds public spending, the State does not finance its own universities, universities continue to compete to attract students, and families continue to go into debt to pay for their children's studies. Only in 2016, with the new Higher Education Law, free higher education was established for the most vulnerable sectors of the population. Despite this great progress, which has allowed thousands of students to access university, the market system in education has not been modified, and the gaps in access to universities depending on the socioeconomic situation of families remain enormous.

With the return to democracy, democratic systems of academic and student participation and appointment of university authorities began to be reinstated in the universities. Many of the advances made in the last 15 years have been triggered by student movements. One of the largest movements was in 2011, which demanded higher quality, universal access and free education. One of the student leaders of that movement is today the elected president of Chile and will assume the presidency of the country at the age of 35 in March 2022.

### **A Brief Description of the University of Santiago of Chile**

The University of Santiago of Chile (USACH) is the second largest public university in Chile. It is a comprehensive university, which means it prioritizes both teaching and research activities and includes undergraduate and graduate programs. The USACH has approximately 20,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students, 600 full-time professors, 1,000 part-time teachers, and 1,000 professional and administrative staff. The USACH has a very hierarchical management scheme, as it is governed by rules created during the Pinochet dictatorship (with a few modifications).

The vast majority of the responsibilities, authority, and decision-making rests with the Rector (remember, many regulations governing the university were created when the rector was a soldier). At present, some functions have been delegated to the Academic Council authorities or the deans of faculty.

The University has two councils, the Board of Directors and the Academic Council. The Board of Directors is comprised of representatives from the government and industry sectors, and the university. The Board has responsibilities related to approving the budget and strategic plan, and the creation of undergraduate and graduate programs. The Academic Council has the function of advising the Rector, and over the years they have been assigned more decisive functions, mainly related to the approval of internal regulations and new programs (prior to the Board of Directors).

The University's budget arises predominantly from undergraduate fees (a percentage covered by government funds while the complement is paid by the students themselves). This budget is centrally managed. There is also some decentralization of the budget where various faculties offer continuing education activities and the resources generated, for the most part, can be retained and used by the faculties. The following section provides a brief overview of the various leadership roles that Fernanda held over the past two decades, including faculty and centralized leadership.

### **Descriptions of Leadership Portfolios in USACH**

I served as the Pro-Rector from 2016 to 2018, Academic Vice-Chancellor from 2010 to 2014, and the Director of Teaching Department from 2007 to 2010. These roles are briefly described below and are in order of hierarchical superiority.

The *Pro-Rector* is responsible for strategic management, defining and managing the university's finances and budgets, coordinating campus infrastructure and maintenance, quality assurance, human resources, technology, and overseeing the responsibilities and activities of the Vice-Chancellors.

The *Academic Vice-Rector* (equivalent to an Academic Vice-Chancellor – AVC) is responsible for the coordination of the faculties' teaching activities, and generation of strategies, action plans, and initiatives to enhance the quality of teaching, supervision and implementation of the educational model, coordination and hiring of academics.

Among the units under the auspices of the AVC is the Teaching Department (TD). The TD resolves student issues that have escalated from the faculties, implements actions and initiatives to enhance teaching, and resolves problems with the faculties related to timetabling, faculty and class scheduling, and managing the academic calendar.

## **Leadership Reflections**

My leadership reflections are discussed from my first centralized leadership role in the Teaching Department to my most recent central role as Pro-Rector, in increasing hierarchical order. These reflections highlight the lessons I garnered over time from my experiences.

### **Director, Teaching Department (TD)**

Despite having studied at the USACH and been Director, Computer Engineering, I had rarely worked or ventured into the centralized areas of the Campus. Consequently, I didn't know much of the workings of the University at the centralized level, that is, I knew little about university governance, policies, procedures, and functions or the challenges beyond those I had encountered at the departmental level. My direct superior, the Academic Vice-Rector (AVC), was also new to the position, and although he knew more of university policy and practices, the challenges and functions of the AVC role were also new for him too. Therefore, he could give me little specific guidance. Hence, I was leading with little contextual or historical institutional knowledge. My secretary and the AVS's secretary, were the individuals who introduced me to the day-to-day functions of the position; indeed, they held considerable institutional and historical knowledge and I valued their support and advice.

The TD's mandates were to solve students' issues that had not been resolved at the faculty level, as well as to coordinate teaching-related activities and solve problems. For example, we established the academic timetable for each semester, resolved problems related to scheduling, and established faculty allocations to classes, amongst others. To my surprise, all of this work and problem solving was done without guiding policies, protocols, or procedures, so each situation was resolved on a "case-by-case" basis which created its own complexity. On the other hand, the AVC had to take action to improve the quality of teaching, some of which fell to the Teaching Department. The TD provides resources to academics for teaching enhancement projects (e.g., for curriculum redesign in individual courses, the creation of class notes, definition of course outcomes, etc.). We modified the objectives of these teaching projects and focused on the implementation of new teaching methodologies. Additionally, we were awarded ministerial funding to implement a Teaching and Learning Center designed to enhance teaching and this new center expanded my leadership portfolio. We created and launched the first certificate in university teaching as part of our academic development initiatives, which encompassed active learning approaches, use of information communication technologies in teaching, and innovative evaluation strategies. These initiatives had high participation and support from some faculties, however, they generated resistance in others. Reflecting about this faculty resistance, I realized the "teaching innovation project" funding application to the Ministry had been developed and submitted by central university administrators without the

participation of the faculties, and this generated suspicion in some faculties and a reluctance to buy-in as they had had no input into the application.

In 2008, the University faced a great challenge: the accreditation<sup>2</sup> process. In the previous accreditation cycle, the university had received negative results, therefore, improving USACH's accreditation results became a priority for the current administration. Key factors that influenced the university's poor results related to the lack of policies, protocols, and procedures for teaching-related activities, which deleteriously influenced quality assurance (QA) indicators. This had direct implications for my leadership role in the Teaching Department. Consequently, I began to formalize the TD's operations, services, policies, and procedures in order to be able to align these with the QA metrics. Of course, these teaching policies and procedures also necessitated change for faculties and departments since the TD worked in coordination with these units through liaison with each faculty's Vice-Dean, Teaching. Happily, by this time, I knew the university well and the way different faculties operated, so it was not difficult for me to formalize the activities we were already doing. However, while this knowledge eased this change process, these requisite QA processes were not as easy as it seemed. Some Deans and Vice-Deans did not agree that the TD should have the authority to formally establish policies and procedures which were important for QA, and to assign functions to the faculties and departments. Initially, this surprised me, since this QA initiative only formalized what was previously established processes and practices, but upon reflection two fundamental considerations became clear to me: (1) the importance of genuine consultation with the faculties to garner buy-in and cooperation, and (2) the importance of flexibility. Establishing policies and procedures were undoubtedly essential as it allowed for the timely detection of problems by all concerned, the implementation of mechanisms for continuous enhancement, ensured transparency of decisions, but most importantly, represented alignment with QA metrics. However, given the diversity in the university, one must be careful because when the procedures or criteria are formalized, they can become rigid and inflexible, and in a community where situations are so diverse, rigidity can be a problem. Hence, it is essential to consult as many internal stakeholders as possible in order to ensure the vast majority of desirable situations are considered the norm, and always leave the potential for an alternative approach for unexpected exceptional situations – namely, integrate the potential for increased flexibility within a stable system (e.g., flexibility within QA uniformity). Finally, it is also important to allow lead-in time for new

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<sup>2</sup> The accreditation process is the quality assurance process in force in the country. This consists of a process of self-evaluation by the university, followed by the visit of expert academic peers. With the information gathered in these activities, the National Accreditation Commission decides whether or not to accredit the institution, indicating the number of years the said accreditation lasts. In those years, accreditation in Chile was not mandatory, but only accredited universities could receive money from the State. In addition, the years of accreditation were considered to calculate the contributions of money from the state to the universities, and it was an important QA metric for attracting students.

procedures and criteria to come into effect, since this frequently requires mental adjustments, modification in approaches and behaviors, or the eradication of long-established poor or misaligned practices, therefore, it is normal to expect resistance with such upheaval and change.

**Lessons Learned:** Being in this leadership position facilitated my learning about the university context and policies and procedures outside of the department, and I also met many university administrators, academics, and professional staff from different disciplines. This provided me the opportunity to gain an understanding of the richness and diversity of opinions and approaches to address a problem, as well as the importance of involving people in decision-making so that they feel part of the different projects which empowers them and increases buy-in. This consultation and engagement promoted effective and efficient change. More importantly, I gained insight into the differences in leading a unit to that of being an academic. Normally, academic work (teaching and research) is highly individualized; you know your objectives well, decide how to achieve these, and you are self-determining and motivated. In research, for example, nobody questions your choice of research (at least not actively, perhaps later you will not be able to publish the article you wrote) and the consequences of your decisions impact few people. Conversely, as a leader, your decisions impact many, and therefore, many want to have their say and be heard. It is not enough to identify a solution or strategy and then move forward; it is essential to consult the various people involved and be willing to modify or change your strategy, sometimes even for a less efficient one, but one more in line with the university culture. When considering consultation, it is important to actively seek the opinion of different people, and even more important, it is crucial to consider not only the people who agree with you (there are never a shortage of sycophants or “yes men”), but also those who think differently or are able to critique your ideas as this provides opportunities to explore varied options, and to become aware of possible threats you may not have discerned yourself. However, openness to critique requires personal leadership qualities of humility, honesty, commitment to transparency, and genuine respect for others’ intellect. Of course, this is not always easy, since you will meet people who have very different interests and values to those of yours, but that is exactly why you should not exclude them from the conversation as it is important to ensure diversity at the consultation table. The dark side though is that also highlights the importance of identifying those you can trust and those who are subversive, destructive, and/or deceptive. An even harder lesson is that those who always agree with you may be the ones who are the most duplicitous, therefore, transparency requires discernment, insight, and social and political acumen.

**Leadership Development:** No doubt, there is learning that can only be achieved with experience, however, other leadership knowledge and expertise can be promoted with adequate education and training. In this case, for example, an induction/orientation related to understanding the university *context*,

*legal/authority*, and *culture* would have prevented me from making silly mistakes and enabled me to lead more assertively, especially during that initial period in office. Additionally, how to facilitate *collaborative work* and *consultation* would have been invaluable to seeking and incorporating the diversity of ideas and opinions within the complex academic culture. Another important aspect that should be developed would be the capacity to be candidly *reflective* and to foster *leader humility* including an openness and appreciation for other's views including those who are divergent to the leader's as it is through difference that increased innovative solutions can be found while also reinforcing positive cultures of true collaboration.

### **Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs**

The next position I assumed was that of Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs (the Latin American equivalent to an Academic Vice-Chancellor – AVC). When I assumed this position, I knew these leadership responsibilities very well, since, as Director TD I had worked closely with the previous Vice-Rector. In fact, when he was away, I served as the “acting” AVC with all the responsibilities that this entailed. Also, as a result of my prior experience, I had an expansive understanding of the university's policies and practices. Additionally, I knew the AVC administrative team, thus, my previous leadership experience was highly advantageous to my performance as AVC and enabled me to “hit the ground running” from day-one.

The AVC had oversight for the enhancement of teaching and learning at the university. To make optimal decisions, the AVC sought advice from the Higher Council of Teaching (HCT), a council formed by the Teaching Vice-Deans of the different faculties. This council discussed different teaching and learning related topics and analyzed the differences between the faculties with the view to finding the best way forward given the discipline diversity. During my tenure as AVC, the HCT worked intensively through weekly meetings, which allowed us to make progress on many issues, such as: new student regulations, new topics and procedures for Teacher Innovation Projects, the refinement of criteria for the creation of teacher planning, allocation of rooms, creation of a new “student satisfaction with teaching” questionnaire, and so on. The Vice-Deans' responsibilities were to coordinate the teaching and learning efforts in their faculties and to serve as a communication conduit between the centralized governance and the faculties. In general, the AVC–HCT relationship operated very well, however, in some cases the Vice-Deans did not conduct the expected consultations with their faculty which meant that, in these cases, their academics only heard about new procedures when these were circulated in the AVC's communications. As may be expected, a negative reaction occurred as a result. Indeed, this situation occurred several times, which generated departmental distrust of the actions of the AVC, as academics felt that decisions were being made autocratically (top-down) and without prior consultation, which was not the case at all, but this illustrated the deleterious effects of poor communication. When I became aware of this mistrust and negative reactions



this distressed me as I never intended my leadership to be a top-down autocracy, rather I wanted good relationships, genuine consultation, and bottom-up – top-down communication with the faculties. I thought that engaging with the Vice-Deans was enough, and if they did not answer, it was not my problem, but this was a big mistake! This caused some of the initiatives promoted by the AVC to meet resistance in some faculties. If I had used a more direct communication strategy that allowed me to reach the departments, I would probably have achieved better results. This, however, was not necessarily an optimal strategy because sometimes direct communication by the central authorities with the faculties' Directors, led the Deans or Vice-Deans to feel they were being circumvented. There should have been more accountability on the Vice-Deans to do their jobs effectively.

On the other hand, during my period as AVC, we strengthened the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) largely due to the injection of new ministerial funds. The TLC was responsible for two fundamental functions: to implement a teaching development program for academics, and to support curricular innovations. During my term as AVC, considerable progress was made on these two objectives, however, progress was heterogeneous across the different faculties, as some viewed initiatives emanating from the university's central administration with distrust and resisted participation. Again, what was lacking was a more participatory strategy that allowed all faculties and departments to be transversally involved.

A very interesting process was the update of the Teaching Model. For this, I requested the TLC to prepare an initial proposal considering the guidelines of the University, as well as the national and international "state of the art" or "best practice" teaching guidelines. When the TLC's proposal was ready, the entire TLC team felt the proposal was excellent. Subsequently, I asked the TLC to organize community consultations so all could read and provide input on the proposal. Many of the TLC team told me that this community consultation and feedback was unnecessary since the proposal was "ready to roll out" and it would be a better use of our time to engage in dissemination activities. Understanding the university culture of resistance to centralized dictates, I insisted on this consultation–feedback cycle, explaining we needed everyone to feel part of the process to create ownership of the proposal as this would facilitate subsequent implementation and engagement. I iterated the proposal was comprehensive and excellent and noted we probably would not receive many suggestions for change. To my surprise and delight, the consultation activities achieved high participation and received extensive feedback which allowed us to significantly refine and polish the proposal, and to include dimensions and suggestions that we had missed in our initial design. Undoubtedly, the new Teaching Model markedly improved as a result of the constructive and thoughtful feedback offered by so many in our university community.

**Lessons Learned as AVC:** As you can see in this section, the work of the AVC was complex and widely ranging across the entire university, as well as nationally. On many occasions, I had to make

difficult, but necessary, decisions, however, being able to make and communicate difficult decisions was essential for the performance in this type of senior centralized leadership position. In this sense, I learned that making decisions in a timely manner, and clearly explaining the decision to those affected, was essential. Even more important, was to demonstrate empathy for those affected, and to sympathetically and clearly explain the underpinning rationale and implications. Despite this, there will always be some who disagree with certain decisions, so it is important to come to terms with the fact that it is not always possible to please everyone and it is responsibility of leadership is to make those hard decisions.

While AVC, I had to appoint different people to take over various functions and I realized that it was very important to align individuals' roles to their abilities, that is, to "play to people's strengths". Additionally, I recognized an essential leadership dimension is to build capacity in your team by taking the time to get to know each individual and offer opportunities for development according to his/her interests and abilities.

**Lessons Learned:** 1) understand how the diversity of opinions can strengthen and refine proposals; 2) to think that only a small elite group have all the answers is simply too arrogant; 3) conduct "genuine" consultation (that is, not consultation simply for the optics of consultation) and participatory engagement processes where different opinions are really taken into account and enriches the discussion, promotes empowerment and trust in leadership, and allows the final product to be substantially enhanced.

**Leadership Development:** In this position, it would have been very useful to know about how to best engage the university community in different consultation processes so that these could have been more effective. Additionally, although I consider I have always had a natural ability to forge productive teams and to make decisions, without a doubt, preparation on teamworking and decision-making processes in complex situations would have allowed me to be more effective and to avoid novice mistakes. Finally, having preparation related to change theory and change management would have been very useful, because, in general, universities are institutions particularly resistant to change and leaders must constantly work with the prevailing academic culture that tends towards maintaining the status quo, because "we have always done it this way". Therefore, understanding change theory and processes, how people react to change, and how to ease individuals and groups through a change (usually fast-paced change) would have been extremely valuable knowledge (e.g., Burke, 2018; Dudar, Scott, & Scott, 2017; Hall & Hord, 2006; Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 2006; Schwahn & Spady, 1998). Finally, given how busy and multi-faceted this role was, having strategies for better time management would have allowed for a better organization of my responsibilities and enabled me to be more productive and efficient.

## **Director, Department of Institutional Financing, Ministry of Education**

I was at the end of my period in the AVC, and although the Rector had been re-elected (the AVC is appointed by the Rector), I did not know if I would continue in the position. Naturally, I was interested to continue as we had several ongoing projects I wanted to see to fruition. At that time, I received a call from the government inviting me to assume the Head of the Institutional Financing Department (IFD) in the Ministry of Education. This Department oversees all government resources the State allocates to the institutions of Higher Education. Encompassed in the ministry funds are institutional grants and competitive funds and the Ministry wanted to modify some of these to better ensure the achievement of the objectives and to streamline and reduce administrative work. I had applied to these funds many times, so had an in-depth knowledge of these funds' strengths and weaknesses and the problems that financial administration generated for universities. My leadership and financial experience was an asset to the Ministry because I understood the university systems and perspectives which would allow me to modify the funding for greater viability from both the university and governmental perspectives. Therefore, I accepted the ministerial invitation and assumed the Director role.

The day I took office in the IFD, my direct superior told me that he did not like the organizational structures (team arrangements, individual's functions, and criteria and procedures) that existed, which had been installed by the previous government, and I should fire specific people. The decision had already been made, and I had to implement these terminations of employment, even though I had not initiated or had any input into these decisions. I was dismayed at this directive and requested he give me some time to evaluate the performance of these individuals before making the dismissals. Finally, I agreed with the need to change the organizational structures, but the gift of time allowed me to provide a clear, knowledgeable, and logical argument when I had to discuss with these individuals the closure of their positions. Eventually, by conducting truthful, sensitive, and empathetic conversations, all understood and left on good terms.

In the IFD, there was a great team and some units worked more independently than others. Once I met the staff, I made adjustments in the organization and procedures so we could make greater progress with our proposed objectives. My prior knowledge of the university and experience as a counterpart in Ministry projects greatly facilitated my IFD work because I had a clear vision of what aspects needed improvement.

At that time the ministry was working on a major reform of the higher education system. This reform aimed to modify the structure of the system, the financing mechanism, the quality assurance system, the mechanisms for accessing higher education, and so on. Professional teams had been created for each reform dimension and there was a team of lawyers who were charged with drafting new legislation in alignment of the changes. As the head of the IFD, I was invited to participate in the financing team, and was charged

with forging the connection between finance and the other dimensions. Gradually, I participated in more and more reform teams, until I was ultimately overseeing and coordinating all of the reform teams. The reform had a small professional support team who were very competent and committed, but there were also others in the team who did not have a well-defined mandate, function, and their abilities were unclear. I quickly learned that this latter group had been included for political reasons. As they did not have well-defined functions, it was complicated to work with them. Additionally, there was no clarity on how the professional team communicated with the team of lawyers, or those who made the final decisions. When I assumed the coordination of the overall reform team, I wanted to consult different stakeholders. To my surprise, the indication from the Ministry authorities was not to consult with anyone external to the ministry and maintain secrecy in relation to all reform activities. This struck me as very strange and was quite disconcerting, since the reform was intended to make major changes to the system, and doing so without consulting stakeholders did not seem reasonable or optimal in terms of achieving a successful outcome, but I had to follow this mandate.

In this ministry role, I was surprised by two things for which I was clearly not prepared. First, the secrecy and an underpinning belief that the team had all the answers. Second, that many decisions were political instead of technical. The question was not what was best for the country, it was: Which political parties would support one or the other alternative? On one occasion, in a meeting with superior authorities, an ex-Minister of Education asked me for my political affiliation. I told him that I did not belong to any party; he was surprised and asked me how I came to be involved in this leadership role. I was offended, because in my view I was there because of my expertise, my leadership experience, and my knowledge of the country's higher education system not my political affiliations. Later, I understood his question: usually, reform agenda were led by political players not experts. Not long after this realization, I returned to the university.

The reform was finally approved by Congress; however, it was not really a true “reform” as it maintained the system and simply made some improvements. When the reform was finally publicized, many stakeholders asked why the reform had not been designed with the same methodology we had used for the design of the MNC. It was a very good question, but clearly politics played a greater role than ensuring a rigorous process!

**Lessons Learned:** 1) The political world is very different from academia, and it required not only expertise, but different values, therefore not all can or should assume politically-oriented positions; and 2) the design process of the NQF re-emphasized the importance of active listening and garnering different opinions, as well as the value of a collaborative methodology which produces superior results.

**Leadership Development:** It would have been extremely useful to *know the organization*, culture, and procedures, and to know the administrators and their way of thinking. On the other hand, *managing tensions* between political decisions and techniques was a great challenge in leading within a political context. Consequently, *mediation* and *conflict resolution* as well as acquiring *political acumen* would have been useful.

## **Pro-Rector**

The office of the Pro-Rector at the USACH is a very complex unit with many responsibilities. One of the challenges for those who assume this position is to understand the financial management of the university, especially the funds coming from the Ministry of Education. When I took office, the Ministry had allocated new funds, and nobody was very clear about the requirements for their use. Fortunately, I had been in the Ministry in the creation of such funds, so I perfectly understood the mandate. Additionally, in the Ministry, I had learned about how the budget of the country works in general, and of public universities in particular, so this prior knowledge was an advantage to me in this role. However, greater knowledge and expertise in financial management and accounting matters would have been very useful, but offsetting a deficit in accounting expertise, I had comprehensive understanding of the university's policies, procedures, and culture.

One of the issues I encountered as Pro-Rector was that I did not have complete freedom to modify my team. There were people I didn't know, so this created issues in delegating responsibilities to them as I did not know their capacities and strengths, which resulted in an enormous workload for me initially as I had to personally address many issues. A real challenge in this role was because of an institutional culture issue; that is, it was common practice that when an academic or a dean dealt with an issue with a central governance authority (for example, with a Vice-Chancellor) and received an unpalatable or unsatisfactory response, they frequently took up the matter with a superior leader, in this case, the Rector or the Pro-Rector. This "seeking a ruling from a higher power" cultural issue dramatically increased my workload as my meeting schedule increased negotiating and resolving conflicts that had already been addressed by my leader-colleagues, rather than engaging with my actual Pro-Rector responsibilities.

Days prior to my assuming the Pro-Rector role, the University received a sensitive report from the Chilean Government showing the misuse of resources by the university related to procurement and construction. Therefore, one of my key tasks was to review all the procedures and correct these abuses in order to resolve this issue prior to the next government review. This negative report generated heightened tensions across the university, since it necessitated the establishment of new operating procedures to ensure compliance with government regulations. There were two main challenges. First, continuous struggles with entrenched organizational culture – "we have always done it this way" – and assisting academics to

understand that it was crucial to follow the university's procedures – “we now have to do it this way”. Second, there were tensions as compliance with procedures frequently resulted in delays or inconvenience which academics perceived as a backward step, as these presented unnecessary barriers to their research activities. Strangely, culturally, it appeared to be “unreasonable” to expect academics to plan ahead as the purchase process was slow. Consequently, we had to improve the response times of purchases, as well as re-training academics to plan ahead and understood that the new procedures were a legal requirement and not an irritating, unwarranted policy established by the university authorities, simply designed to make academics' lives difficult. As always, it was easier to achieve this with some people than with others.

Another dimension to the role was the responsibility to work with unions. This was a pleasant surprise. I had heard from previous leaders that it was difficult to talk with the union leaders, but I found that, in general, the union leaders were respectful and understood the priorities of the university so it was easy to work with them.

Another challenge as Pro-Rector, was that I had to follow through with “legacy” projects and the issue was that I did not totally agree with these, but they had been promised by the previous Pro-Rector or Rector. It was necessary to come to terms with the fact that when one assumes a position there may be history and commitments made by the previous leader, even though it would have been nicer to start afresh, but this was the case. Therefore, these projects created a dilemma, as I felt conflicted with assuming control of a project that I did not consider a priority nor were they aligned with institutional objectives.

**Lessons Learned:** Having the *right people on a team* is essential, particularly when delegation of workload is essential in an overwhelming role. Additionally, it is very complex to make progress if people on the team are not trustworthy or do not have the requisite skills. The characteristics of the team and the *authority to make changes to the team* should be ascertained prior to accepting a position because inheriting an incompatible or incompetent team and being unable to make changes can make a leadership role untenable.

*The importance of reflection;* sometimes the lessons learned become clear after leaving the office, because when you leave and look back at things with greater distance you are able to gain perspective to distill what was really important. In my case, there were two lessons that, I think, are worth commenting on.

The first, is about *authenticity* (Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2011). You must be aware of, and faithful to, your values and principles. Before being in the position, it is common to think that nothing is going to change your value stance, but when you are in the role it is different because you feel that you can contribute, that you can make a difference in issues that seem more relevant, then you feel pressured to

concede to others through consultation processes. To me this feels like a truism, because not everyone thinks the same way, however, when you are in that dynamic on a day-to-day basis, the limits of how far you are prepared to compromise can become unclear and, without realizing it, you can end up conceding more than you would like, accepting behaviors, situations, or decisions with which you disagree, thereby losing your authenticity.

Second, *loyalty*. For me, loyalty in teams is fundamental. If you are in the team you should be loyal to the team and especially to your leader, and if you can no longer be loyal (because you do not agree with the leader or his/her agenda/approach), then it is time to leave. As Pro-Rector, it became clear (I am still in the process of learning) that loyalty does not mean the same thing to everyone. When one is loyal and transparent with the team, but team members do not reciprocate your loyalty, you place yourself in a vulnerable position. Even so, this does not mean you should form a team of “yes” people; rather, it is very important to take the time to reflect on your own actions and beliefs, and to have trustworthy and loyal people who will show you what you are not seeing. But this means you must establish a “psychologically safe” environment for them to speak up and to posit different ideas without fear of reprisal.

**Leadership Development:** *Time management, organizational, and planning skills* are very important in such demanding positions, and having these skills can help achieve goals more efficiently. Additionally, leaders need to learn to delegate and not micromanage as there is frequently insufficient time to do this because of the day-to-day crises and new urgencies that need to be solved. Leadership development also needs to include knowledge of *conflict resolution* and *leading change*. Considering that it is often necessary to respond to different interest groups, it is very important to have the ability to *set clear expectations* and to be able to *engage others* to achieve common goals through *mediation, negotiation, and effective communication*. In addition to these more skills-oriented aspects, it is important for leaders to understand *authentic leadership* and *transformational leadership theories* as these are crucial to working effectively with others, to promote trust and *psychological safety*, and to engage in productive change and foster positive cultures.

## **Final Reflection**

After twelve years in leadership in higher education, and without having had any type of leadership training, I have come to the conviction that an authentic leadership style is fundamental, not only to achieve long-term goals in universities, but also to create a university community based on trust and truth, where all points of view are accepted and conflict resolution is based on dialogue. Avolio and his colleagues (2004) defined authentic leaders as those: who know who they are, what they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective, knowledge, and

strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, resilient, and of high moral character. (p. 802)

Indeed, Luthans and Avolio (2003) indicated authentic leaders demonstrate: transparency, confidence, resilience, hopefulness, optimism and forward thinking, moral/ethical dealings, and promote capacity building. Contrastingly, authentic leaders repudiate toxic leadership behaviors like abusive supervision, coercion, threats and intimidation, revenge, workplace bullying, abuse of power, narcissism, Machiavellianism, petty tyranny, and/or psychological endangerment (Edmondson, 2019; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Indeed, being faithful to your values and always acting consistently with them, considering the points of view of others, being transparent in decision-making, and being clear about the consequences of your decisions and actions are, from my point of view, fundamental elements for successful and authentic leadership.

Of course, depending on the context and the different situations, it is necessary to use other leadership theories and approaches, such as shared and transformational leadership which are essential in meeting the contemporary challenges in universities, particularly in empowering others and creating positive change and cultures. As Shanahan (2019) stated: “Ultimately engaging the shared collegial governance structure of the university will enable boards [and superior authorities] to better navigate the complicated leadership space and will strengthen decision-making” (p. 19). She too emphasized the importance of consultation with the various stakeholders in the university and engaging in transparent decision-making. Similarly, Kouzes and Posner’s (2019) transformational leadership is gaining respect and momentum in university leadership development programs due to its overt people-orientation, capacity to positively influence academic cultures, and constructive focus in leading with heart, inspiring a shared vision, encouraging capacity building, and to successfully lead change.

The knowledge and skills necessary for effective leadership in higher education have been studied by multiple authors, and it is not surprising that there are many similarities between what I learned through experience and what has been reported from research in different parts of the world. These knowledge and skills included **knowledge of the institution and its culture** (Raschio et al., 2019; Pedraja-Rejas et al., 2018; Wang & Sedivy-Benton, 2016), **personal and interpersonal skills** (Alghamdi et al., 2016), **communication skills** (Vilkinas & Ladyshewsky, 2014; Choudhary & Paharia, 2018; Jooste & Frantz, 2017; Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2018), **teamworking and teambuilding** (Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Söderhjelm et al., 2018; Choudhary & Paharia, 2018; Jooste & Frantz, 2017), **strategic planning** and **change management** (Huerta-Riveros & Pedraja-Rejas, 2019; Sanchez, 2016; Raschio et al., 2019), **decision making** (Choudhary & Paharia, 2018; Jooste & Frantz, 2017; Gonzalez-Rodriguez 2018), **promoting transparency** and **clear expectations** (Ngo et al., 2014), **value the diversity of opinions of**



others and conduct genuine consultations (Ngo et al., 2014), networking and collaborative methodologies (Cifuentes & Vanderlinde, 2015; Cleverley-Thompson, 2016; Ruben et al., 2018; Raschio et al., 2019).

Table1 provides recommendations and/or comments regarding each of these knowledge and skills, which, from our experience, are useful for achieving successful leadership.

**Table 1:**  
*Dimensions for Achieving Successful Leadership*

<b>Recommendation for Successful Leadership</b>	
Knowledge of the institution and its culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know the institution: organization, policies, procedures, what can be done and what cannot, important contact people who you can ask about different matters.</li> <li>• Understand the culture of the institution, particularly those of academics.</li> <li>• Understand the financial management of the institution.</li> </ul>
Personal and Interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop reflectiveness and critical thinking to analyze complex situations: why does it appear that everyone is going in different direction, how to engage people to achieve a common goal.</li> <li>• Be aware that not all people share your values (e.g., personal loyalty, transparency, institutional loyalty).</li> <li>• Be flexible within the legal framework: it is necessary to be flexible to be able to resolve the diversity of situations.</li> <li>• Humility: be prepared to change your mind without losing consistency in actions (be prepared to admit that you got it wrong and how you could have done things better and differently, particularly through input from others).</li> <li>• Empathize with people in different situations.</li> <li>• Be able to reflect on one's work and performance and make necessary changes when you detect your own negative or unproductive reactions or behaviors.</li> </ul>
Teamworking and team building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know your people: what are their strengths and weaknesses and how to get the best from the team by playing to individual strengths.</li> <li>• Reassess the alignment between roles and people. Some people do not perform well in their current job, but they may have skills for other jobs so use your knowledge of your people to set them up for success.</li> <li>• Build teams based on reciprocal trust and loyalty. Don't micromanage good people: Give team members the freedom to make decisions, but ensure that the ultimate goal is not lost.</li> <li>• Create a good working environment, worry about people and their particular situations, encourage team members get to know each other. Do not selfishly monopolize successes: publicly recognize the achievements of people and teams.</li> <li>• Support the team: if someone makes a mistake, support them and find the solution to the problem, talk about "we" made a mistake and refrain from individualizing it to the person – "you made the mistake". Once resolved, look at procedures to reduce the likelihood of a repetition of the same mistake. You should also "reframe the failure" so that can be a useful learning activity (Edmondson, 2019, p. 15).</li> </ul>
Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate clearly, adapting the language depending on the target audience.</li> <li>• Ability to motivate and influence peers.</li> <li>• Be transparent about the evidence underpinning decisions.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't just send emails: take the time to talk to actually people</li> </ul>
Strategic planning and change management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be clear about the interests of the institution, ensure that these are considered in all decision making (strategic consistency).</li> <li>• Plan strategically, organize time properly.</li> <li>• Know who you can trust.</li> <li>• Resolve the urgency, but do not lose focus on the ultimate goal.</li> </ul>
Decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be able to make difficult decisions: understand that it is not always possible to please everyone.</li> <li>• Understand and accept there will always be people who disagree with your leadership.</li> </ul>
Build truth and set clear expectation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be consistent. Your goals, priorities, and ways of acting should be clear to everyone. Tell the truth, manage people's expectations, sincerely state what is possible and what is not.</li> <li>• Have consistent criteria, without favoring some to the detriment of others (do not play favorites).</li> </ul>
Value the diversity of opinions and conduct genuine consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be humble. Understand that you don't have all the answers, consult experts, and the community – they may have answers you didn't think of.</li> <li>• Understand that diversity of opinions is a strength. Involve people in work and decision making.</li> <li>• Create a psychologically safe environment where speaking up and taking risks are viewed as valuable and in pursuit of a better produce or process: that is, you clarify “the need for voice” (Edmondson, 2019, p. 15).</li> </ul>
Networking and Collaborative methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have an effective methodology for consulting the community so input can be collected in a timely manner.</li> <li>• Prevent meetings from being catharsis only, to ensure productivity. Give feedback to the people, and explain why their opinions were or were not considered.</li> <li>• Even with teams or people who think very differently, it is always possible to find a meeting or minds or points of compromise. Work based on these alignments.</li> </ul>

As we know, in many universities around the world, leaders are usually appointed from within academia and often have no training in leadership, management, or administration. In my opinion, having leadership development programs would be helpful to avoid common pitfalls and to provide useful guidance. Normally, when assuming a leadership position, the person must immediately make decisions and “hit the ground running”; therefore, just-in-time leadership development (taking into account the leader’s needs) appears more appropriate to me than formal programs of longer duration, although preparation programs could be more effective for preparing aspiring leaders. Table 2 outlines key topics for leadership development programming.

**Table 2:**  
*Relevant Subject for Leadership Development Programs*

<b>Relevant Topics for Leadership Development Programs</b>	
Knowledge of context and operational authority	Institutional cultures and its influence; structure, policies, and procedures; legal frameworks.
Specific knowledge	Financial entrepreneurship and budget management, quality assurance, curriculum design, change theory/processes/management.
Communication skill	The importance of effective communication, ability to set clear expectations, transparency, interpersonal skills.
Time and motion – productivity and efficiency	Self-organization, strategies for time management, planning, prioritizing (focus on critical activities), delegation, project management, teamworking skills, performance management.
Understanding of personal leadership values/approaches	Different leadership theories: Authentic and transformational leadership theories, shared/collegial governance, etc.; advantages and disadvantages, self-reflection, self-evaluation, values.
Professional skills	Decision-making, conflict resolution/mediation/negotiation, strategic visioning and planning; teambuilding, capacity building.
External stakeholders	Strategies to identify key stakeholders, consultation methodologies, collaboration and networking strategies.

### **A Final Story as a Conclusion**

Overall, this paper provides a narrative and distills some guidance about the dimensions for leadership effectiveness and leadership development. Throughout these reflections it is clear to see the importance of relationships, creating and productively working with teams, and eliciting people’s thinking. Hence, I wanted to conclude this paper with a brief account of a situation that occurred towards the end of my latest leadership term which contributed to my stepping down. This flagged a fundamental factor which will influence my future leadership approach.

*Normally, when someone goes to the Pro-Rector office at USACH, it is to request something. Likewise, many of the documents received are requests (e.g., resources, personnel, deadlines, infrastructure, equipment, etc.). In all cases, when analyzing an application, I consider, “Is this good for the University”? If yes, then I consider the viability of the request and I make every effort to advance it (although it is not always possible). Conversely, if the answer is no, I explain why it is not possible. Pondering “Is it good for the University?” for me, is the only valid question (and in some proposals: “Is it good for the country?” should also be considered). In all my years in university leadership, I never wondered about the allegiance*

of the person making a request; that is, whether he/she voted for the current Rector; or supported us in the vote of the Academic Council; or if this request was in my best interests; or if this request meant an increase in my workload; or if it entailed navigating difficult people; and/or if it would involve a lot of stress; or if a favorable decision would facilitate my re-election or re-appointment. Indeed, one of the riches of working at a University is differing opinions which allows us to make creative proposals and solve complex problems. Diversity is a strength of the university, therefore, when forming a team to lead the university, the important thing is not to have people who have the same answers, but people who ask excellent questions.

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