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POSITIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

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POSITIVE MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

The prevailing view held at contemporary Polish universities is that their main goal is to achieve effects measured by indicators, which applies to each element of their mission: education, research and the third mission, whereas the means to accomplish this goal consists of increasing the requirements and motivating by the "carrot and stick" approach. That approach discounts the importance of building a positive relationship between members of the staff and undertaking activities intended to create a situation where hedonistic joy of work will dominate in universities. This in turn will promote integration of the academic environment and induce employees to strive for mastery to find pleasure and satisfaction rather than to achieve specific effects of their activity, which eventually will lead to better efficiency.

The main goal of the paper is to demonstrate that contemporary universities may be improved by synthesis of strategic antinomies, i.e. seeking the possibility of combining opposite approaches to solving problems concerning university organization and management.

The motivation method used at universities to date turns out to be ineffective; therefore, following the positive thinking idea formulated by Martin Seligman, the author of the study proposes to apply synthesis of strategic antinomies (paradoxes) observed in universities and use the results to counteract the noticeable trauma of academic communities and replace it with positive thinking, consisting of the aspiration to discover and understand phenomena, the sense of belonging to the academic environment and building positive relationships with that environment. Such an approach is in agreement with the "philosophy" proposing to replace the dictatorial "tyranny of the OR" (either 'a' or 'b'", but not both at the same time with the genius of the AND (both 'a' and 'b'), applied by visionary organizations, such as universities should strive to become.

Keywords – strategic paradoxes; university organization and management; resistance to changes; positive management

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Motto
"The test of a first-rate intelligence
is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time
and still retain the ability to function"
F. Scott Fitzgerald

1. Introduction

While considering whether the essence of positive psychology (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive management (Nowe trendy, 2006; Cameron et al., 2009) may be related to the realities of contemporary universities, it may be reasonable to ask whether a university can be managed. This question is far from trivial in view of: the multiplicity of decision centres in a university[1], collegiality (Clark, 2001; Kwiek, 2015), primacy of scholars' knowledge, as well as the autonomy of organisational units within the university. These determinants are well known and researched.

While seeking solutions to problems concerning university organisation and management, one usually comes up against legal determinants (overregulation); once these stumbling blocks are successfully overcome, arrival at the final decision is time-consuming or becomes paralysed due to collegiality or multiplicity of decision centres. Not without a reason, one of the metaphors describing a contemporary university is organised anarchy, whereas the decision-making process is represented by the garbage can model (Cohen et al., 1972).

The question arises how to leave this vicious circle and manage the university in an efficient manner. The author of this study perceives such a possibility, identifying strategic paradoxes (tensions) (de Witt, Meyer, 2005) in a university and attempting to manage them (Lewis, 2000). To make this happen, it is necessary to refrain from treating paradoxes in terms of "tyranny of the Or" and to make efforts to realise two seemingly contradictory ideas at the same time ("genius of the And"). It seems appropriate to quote the opinion expressed by Paul Polman (CEO, Unilever): "The difference between average and outstanding firm is the 'AND Mentality'. We must find and create tensions – force people into different space for thinking… This is not just a performance issue but a survival issue, because managing paradox helps foster creativity and high performance" (Lewis et al., 2014). Believing that this opinion may be related to the tertiary education institution, the author of this article sets out to demonstrate that contemporary universities may be improved by synthesis of strategic antinomies, i.e. seeking the possibility of combining opposite approaches to solving problems concerning university organization and management. In practice, this means making an attempt to describe the management processes in a university using the language of strategic paradoxes and identifying the possible tension synergies. These considerations will be preceded by a short description of a contemporary university, largely based on Polish experiences.

[1] Peter Drucker quoted the following opinion voiced by the vice-chancellor of a certain university: "There is no top management in this university. Every professor, certainly every senior professor is at least as much 'top management' as I am – and not one of us can take a decision" – P. Drucker (1995), Zarządzanie w czasach burzliwych (Managing in turbulent times), Biblioteka Nowoczesności, Akademia Ekonomiczna w Krakowie, Czytelnik, p. 135.

2. Description of a contemporary (Polish) university

The acronym VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), used by managers with respect to business ventures may well be used to describe a contemporary university. That is because volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are features defining the world of organisations regardless of the type of ownership, thus also including universities. Hence, it is a challenge of the present times to look for new, accelerative methods of management of these organisations.

Volatility refers to, inter alia, the expected decrease in the population of studying-age individuals in the EU27 countries by nearly a quarter between 2005 and 2050, and by nearly 60% in Poland and Bulgaria (Ritzen, 2010). In these circumstances, petrification of university reality means looking back, since development of a university requires projection, rather than only retrospection.

Uncertainty arises from an overregulated and rapidly changing legal system, both on the tertiary education system level and the institution level, as well as the absence of core budgets of public universities financed from public funds. Uncertainty also results from incomplete membership of the organisation, where one must be loyal both to the organisation and to one's own discipline, which are two different things.

The complexity of university management is also due to the multiplicity of decision centres as well as the exaggerated role of collegial bodies and their considerable inertia in decision-making. The decision-making processes in a university are also incomprehensible for members of the academic community and seen as based on the trial-and-error approach. Many decisions taken in a university are of negligible importance for its individual members, who "live a life of their own". This leads to inertia and significant difficulties in introducing any changes.

Ambiguity in university management arises from the fact that the objectives formulated by the individual organisational units are often mutually contradictory and may be regarded as loose suggestions of specific actions rather than a coherent structure. These objectives are accepted as long as they remain in the verbal sphere, but when they take a more definite shape, they give rise to doubts and conflicting opinions. All this leads to random decisions, failing to provide a solution to the problem. Often seemingly straightforward issues assume the proportions of serious problems, which may be incomprehensible for anyone outside the academic circles (Leja 2011, p.199).

The aforementioned features of universities are accompanied by a distinct polarisation of opinions as to the place and role of universities in the modern world, visible in the academic circles themselves and in their environment. Here is a selection of statements illustrating that point:

Ewa Solska quotes Alisdar MacIntyre's opinion that "universities are now faced with the choice between a project of commercial "professional improvement corporation" (with the faculty of Philosophy as a trendy curiosity in the sphere of cultural studies), and unprofitable continuation of the principle of knowledge integrity and universality". In the conflict of opinions voiced by the representatives of humanities and engineering, the latter usually

prevail, while universities are experiencing progressive departmentalisation and evolution towards an enterprise of experts (Solska, 2008, p.74). The discord between the choices mentioned by Solska is increasing in Polish academic realities and is exacerbated by the permanent underfunding of education from public sources (ca. 0.4% GDP) comparable to non-public sources, and by the effects of the clash between the Polish university traditions, deeply rooted in the Humboldt education ideal, as well as the academic culture, with the expectations of the external environment, chiefly the business sector.

Stefan Kwiatkowski, founder of the world's first department of intellectual entrepreneurship, asks: “Universities – an example of unintelligent organisations?”, pointing out that contemporary academic institutions are regarded as black boxes where only the inputs and outputs count, which greatly simplifies the view of the role of universities and reduces their evaluation to the analysis of an increasing number of indicators (Kwiatkowski 2001, pp. 209–234). This is reflected by the view held by decision-makers that quantitative indicators are the best measure of achievement in education, research and cooperation with the social environment. This leads to a situation where many scholars focus on obtaining the highest possible impact factor, Hirsch index or number of citations. Although important, these indicators must not obscure the main objective of universities, that is, discovering and explaining new phenomena, regardless of the discipline.

Mats Alvesson, co-author of Critical Management Science, points to the inflation of higher education, whose purpose becomes, to an increasing extent, to “obtain credentials” required to pursue an attractive career instead of developing the ability of critical reflection, verbal and written communication and improving cognitive skills (Alvesson 2013, p. 74). The prevalence of tertiary education (in Poland about half of people aged 19–24 are studying) resulted in a fall in educational standards, also due to the fact that, as Michał Zawadzki has observed, an entrepreneurial university makes it impossible to carry out educational processes, corrupting them, and as a result fails to fulfil the intrinsic cultural function of university, i.e. democratisation of social life” Michał Zawadzki, 2014, p.126).

These observations indirectly point to the deficiency of describing universities' accomplishments by means of quantitative indicators, which is a common practice in tertiary education institutions in Europe. In the author's opinion, this approach to achievement evaluation stems from the mechanistic description of university as an organisation (Morgan, 1986). This is in conflict with the model representing an organisation as a live organism and with the principles of holographic design (redundancy of functions, critical minimum of specifications, necessary diversity and principles of teaching how to learn) that facilitate self-organisation (Ibid.). Further, it creates an image of university as a bureaucratic organisation, contrary to its nature, which most closely resembles professional bureaucracy and progresses towards adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1983).

How to disentangle this Gordian knot? The author of this article suggests an approach in line with positive management principles, i.e. regarding a university as the metaphoric live organism. This will in turn foster the learning process, stimulating curiosity and creativity and generating social capital (Rozwój…, 2015). A university following these principles will create

conditions conducive to free exchange and conversion of knowledge between staff, internal and external environment, as well as encourage the staff to share their knowledge.

The suggested way out of this complicated situation (VUCA) faced by contemporary universities is to identify strategic paradoxes and then choose whether to consider them in terms of the 'tyranny of the Or' or 'genius of the And'.

3. End of the 'carrot and stick' approach

Contemporary universities show a tendency to algorithmise their activities, manifesting itself as the attempt to measure all achievements. This trend can be observed in research activities, as already mentioned, as well as in teaching – with respect to the implementation of the national qualifications framework, which involves assessment of the level of knowledge, skills and social competences acquired by students. Because of this approach, students develop routine problem-solving skills, as they are required to follow an algorithm. An alternative approach would be to promote self-orientation, i.e. developing intrinsic motivation conducive to creativity, as opposed to the controlling extrinsic motivation, which is less beneficial (Pink 2011, as cited in: Amabile, 1996).

In practice, a member of academic staff has no alternative but to keep to the 'publish or perish' principle and a student – to achieve the required results. However, this approach is ineffective, because it does not take into account the fact that success is based on intrinsic, rather than imposed motivation. Scholars are not pre-programmed robots oriented towards the achievement of specific indicators measuring the quality of academic work which, by definition, is or at least should be creative and directed by the researchers themselves.

Pink mentions seven disadvantages of the 'carrot and stick' management and motivation, the most noteworthy of which are: the adverse impact on intrinsic motivation, suppression of creativity, encouraging unethical behaviour and promoting short-sighted thinking (Pink 2009, p. 66).

The author of this study believes that this philosophy must be rejected as not conducive to building positive relations between members of the academic community, which, as Michaly Csikszentmihalyi describes, would induce researchers to attain the state of “optimal experience” when “the body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 2005). That might be the objective to pursue when looking for unconventional methods of university management and staff motivation.

The author suggests that it should be the aim of the dialectic approach to university management, ensuring positive utilisation of the power of strategic paradoxes identifiable in a particular university and motivation of the staff by allowing its members to enjoy autonomy, encouraging their efforts towards mastery and supporting their aspirations for purpose maximisation (Pink 2009, pp. 91–152).

4. Synthesis of strategic paradoxes in a university

We speak of a paradox when there is a tension persisting between interrelated opposite elements, both of which are logically justified but mutually contradictory. We can clearly

identify: a dilemma (A lor B), paradox (A and B) and dialectic (if A and B then C), which becomes a paradox when the relationships between a thesis and antithesis persist over time.

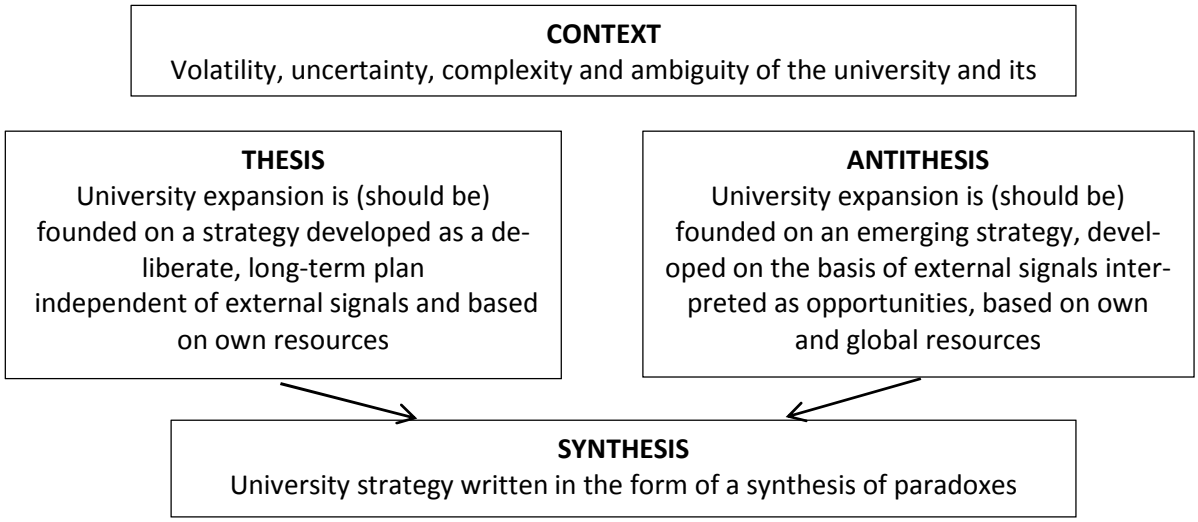
Fig. 1. Yin Yang as a symbol of paradox

Paradox: Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exists simultaneously and persist over time. Such elements seem logical when considered in isolation, but irrational, inconsistent, even absurd, when juxtaposed. *Decision goal*: identify a both/and solution that leverages synergies and distinction of the opposing elements

Source: Lewis 2014, p. 61

The internal boundary within the Yin and Yang symbol (Fig. 1) denotes the differences between opposites, whereas the external boundaries show the ability to achieve a synergy of opposites to make a whole. There is an element of each of the opposites in the other (e.g. a while circle in the black area).

Fig. 2. University strategy dialectic



Source: own based on (Krupski 2009, p. 205)

Synthesis of paradoxes in a university enables development of strategies using the dialectic triad: thesis-antithesis-synthesis (Fig. 2 and seek opportunities that may become a source of a competitive advantage. A detailed discussion of strategic paradoxes extends beyond the scope of this article, hence, only a suggestion of their synthesis is presented herein (Fig. 3), without a broader commentary, which can be found in another study (Leja 2011, pp. 206-256).

Fig 3. Synthesis of strategic paradoxes in a university

Strategy dimensions	Detailed synthesis		
	Themes	Paradoxes	Perspective How to manage a paradox?
Strategy-building process	Strategic thinking	Logic vs creativity	Link the logical thinking concerning the university's genetic code with creative thinking concerning development trends (G. Hamel, C.K. Prahalad 1999; F. van Vught 2009)
	Strategy forming	Premeditation vs spontaneity	Promote opportunity seeking by developing heterarchic and dispersed university structures (R. Krupski 2009), reduce the rationality of strategy in favour of self-organisation (S. Hart 1992)
	Strategic change	Evolution vs revolution	Utilise the ambidextrous organisation concept (M. Tushman, Ch. O'Reilly III 1996)
Strategy content	Organisational unit level	Own resources vs global resources	Tailor the offer to individual needs, using global resources (C.K. Prahalad, M.S. Krishnan 2010)
	University level	Centralisation *vs* decentralisation	Strengthen the core, creating conditions for self-organisation; enhance transfer of knowledge – use the assets of each of the university units without trying to standardise them (G. Hamel, C.K. Prahalad 1999, G. Morgan 2005; B.R. Clark 1998)
	Network level	Competition vs cooperation	Utilise the concept of coopetition (A.M. Brandenburger, B. Nabeluff 1996)
Strategic concept	Internal context	Organisational leadership vs. organisational dynamics	Promote hypertext organisation of university (I. Nonaka, H. Takeuchi 2000) or third generation university (J.G. Wissema 2005), implement creative management (D.K. Hurst, J.C. Rush, R.E. White 1989)
	External concept	Offer development: supply-driven vs demand-driven	Go beyond customer orientation (G. Hamel, C.K. Prahalad), use the stakeholder theory (R.E. Freeman 1984; Th. Donaldson, L.E. Preston 1995)
Purpose of university		Temple of knowledge vs efficient organisation	Modify the university towards an organisation serving the environment (H.I. Ansoff 1985; B. Wawrzyniak 1999)

Source: own based on: (de Wit, Meyer, 2007, p. 33)

The suggestions presented in the table (Fig.3) demonstrate that the dialectic synthesis of the opposites in university is feasible, which is the necessary condition for developing new knowledge as well as imparting and processing the existing knowledge (Nonaka, Toyama 2002, pp. 998-999).

Contradictions lead to tensions, because they necessitate confrontation of different attitudes and positions, each of which is rationally justified; therefore, it is a great accomplishment to manage a university (or any other organisation) so as to recognise paradoxes as added value rather than a stumbling block to development.

5. How to manage a university?

Paradox management is an attempt to demonstrate that strategic tensions can be utilised in the development of universities. It requires the following skills of the university leader: cognitive complexity, confidence, conflict management and communication (Smith, Lewis 2012, p. 227).

Cognitive complexity is the skill of integrative thinking, making it possible to understand the nature of paradox and perceive the opportunity for synergy of strategic tensions.

Paradox management is innovative and therefore risky, so it is necessary to ensure mutual trust of university management and staff and their consent to take risks. In view of the fact that strategic tensions tend to generate conflict, it is necessary to be able to manage a conflict to make it a win-win situation (Smith, Lewis 2012, p. 229-230). A vital element of paradox management are communication skills, or, more precisely, awareness that not only the content, but also the form of communication and relationship between the parties is significant (Olivier 2010). A reflective approach to paradox helps to understand its essence and complexity, and therefore perceive the links between the “poles” of paradox and see them as complementary (Lewis 2000, p. 764).

The question is how to put the aforementioned leadership skills into practice with respect to the functioning of a contemporary university. It might be worth citing Mary Parker Follett, considered to be one of the pioneers of management: “To persuade people to follow you and to make them work with you are two completely different ideas. These days, a good leader does not want subordinates who obey him, who passively do as they are told. A good leader tries to educate people who are exact opposites: people who are masters of what they do. can prove that they have been well managed” (Follett 1927/1941 as cited in: Czarniawska 2010, p. 94).

This quote is a good illustration of the essence of contemporary university management, which is closer to the term of “co-leadership” coined by Stefan Tengblad (Ibid.), or co-management, rather than management within the traditional meaning of this word. According to Follet, co-leadership requires adherence to the principles of calling, cooperation and integration.

Calling, or revealing all talents of co-workers is important in every organisation but particularly significant in a university. It has nothing to do with obedient employees carrying out their supervisor's orders, because loyalty to the boss, conformism and compliant behaviour should not be rewarded. As confirmed by one of the weird rules of creativity management proposed by Robert Sutton, management involves, amongst other things, encouraging co-workers (I consciously avoid the term 'subordinate') to oppose their bosses and co-workers or even ignore them (Sutton 2006).

Cooperation at university does not stand in contradiction to the fact that academic teachers are largely independent of each other, which is in agreement with the nature of organisations of professional bureaucracy structure (Mintzberg 1983). The rapid expansion of information and knowledge, as well as narrow specialisation forces researchers to develop cooperation networks.

Integration has a particular significance in a university because, as the opposite to "divide and rule" philosophy, it determines transfer, conversion and synergy of knowledge, where the team leader is responsible for integrating the knowledge and experiences of individuals (Czarniawska 2010, pp. 94-95).

One of the key elements of good management is motivation. It is therefore appropriate to ask: what can be offered after rejecting the carrot and stick philosophy?

6. How to motivate academic staff?

Management of a contemporary university or its basic organisational unit should be reduced to creating a space for the activity of academic teachers, inspiring them to engage in creative work and strengthening their mutual relationships. This requires a new approach to motivation to replace the carrot and stick philosophy. Pink indicates three elements that determine the success of motivation (Pink 2012, p. 91-152):

a) granting autonomy to staff (empowerment may also be useful) – academic teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in three aspects of academic work, i.e.: what they do and when, how they do it, and who they do it with, with certain limitations due to the discipline they represent and the organisation of research teams. The question is: can scholars make use of autonomy?

b) convincing employees that the most important thing is to focus on mastery – this way, one does not concentrate on the result of his action but takes it because it brings pleasure and satisfaction, and consequently increases efficiency; it might be worth quoting the motto of William McKnight: "hire good people and leave them alone" (Pink 2012, p. 101). Therefore, it is important that universities should employ individuals keen on creation, for whom academic work represents an intrinsic value; this ensures a positive, fresh and creative attitude to life (Pink 2013, p. 120) referred to by psychologists as the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 2005). Working towards mastery as a way of thinking, as well as the wish to take on intellectual challenges are the features of academic workers. Achieving mastery is not an effortless process, so it is not without a reason that Pink states that "mastery is a pain" (Pink 2013, p. 131). Striving towards mastery has an asymptotic nature because it involves a long process and approaching the goal gradually (Pink 2013, pp. 133–134),

c) purpose maximisation, where the purpose is not gain because "wealth maximisation as an emotional catalyst lacks the power to fully mobilise the energy of an individual" since the correlation between money and happiness is weak (Pink 2013, pp. 141–147). A matter of great importance for each organisation is that its employees should identify with it ('my organisation' rather than 'this organisation').

This takes on a unique dimension in a university, where success is determined by the ability to achieve synergy of knowledge resources, which may be helped or hindered by the organisational culture. Discovering new phenomena or explaining the ones already discovered but not yet clarified constitute an added value for researchers. Intrinsic aspirations (craving for knowledge and curiosity about the world) are more important here than extrinsic ones (desire for fame). Scientists keep looking for goals and try to maximise them because if they consider that the goal has been achieved, their research work comes to an end.

7. Summary

This article is intended to demonstrate that university management requires unconventional methods and using the “carrot and stick” approach in motivating staff is ineffective. One of the sources of success for a university is an increased resistance to impacts known under the acronym VUCA. The essence of this increased resistance is well reflected by the term 'antifragility' coined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2013). In practice, it involves identifying the element of activity that may enable the use of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity and randomness as opportunities rather than threats to the university. It is the author's opinion that antifragility of a university may be reinforced by exploiting the potential of strategic paradoxes.

Application of strategic tensions in university management entails a change in thinking from considering paradoxes in terms of 'tyranny of the Or' in favour of synergies of tensions , i.e. their simultaneous use in accordance with the 'genius of the And' approach.

The synthesis of paradoxes proposed herein, using the dialectic thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad shows new opportunities for the improvement of university management. These may be supported by the co-leadership principles formulated by Mary Parker Follet nearly 90 years ago.

The solution suggested here should be accompanied by innovative approach to motivation proposed by Pink. This approach consists of three elements. The first motivator is granting autonomy to academic staff. This involves departure from rigid organisational structures in favour of loose ones, and supporting self-organisation of researchers. The second motivator is to help staff to work towards mastery as a way of thinking, which entails the pain caused by effort and determination. Mastery is a process of asymptotic nature, which brings about a paradoxical clash of frustration and enthusiasm. The third element of motivation is purpose maximisation. There is a distinct tendency at universities to overuse hard, dehumanised terms to describe the goals we want to achieve. The problem is that measuring achievements with the use of quantitative indicators does not motivate but leads to stress, causing side effects similar to those arising from the carrot and stick approach.

The author of this article believes that the proposed methods of university management and academic staff motivation will expand the space for creative activity and make it possible to achieve a balance between the desire for accomplishment and for well-being (Seligman 2011).

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