Review of: "Strategies to Resolve Toxic Leadership Actions in Engineering Institutions which Impede Faculty Performance and Innovation"

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The topic is one of real importance to both Engineering Institutions in India and elsewhere.

Struggles over control of tertiary educational institutions, and over what are the correct values to inform their work, have inspired a large number of studies, and although the university as a whole is usually the focus of analysis sometimes it is a sub-unit. Well known examples are: *The University in Ruins* (Bill Readings), *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* (Derek Bok), *What are Universities For?* (Stefan Collini); and less well known but overlapping with the approach of the article *The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars and Neoliberal Ideology* (John Smyth).

What this field makes clear is that there are several linked developments in tertiary education and educational policy that can undermine the type of internally motivated academic work driven by the norms of the discipline that the author wishes to see nurtured. This makes an exclusive focus on toxic leadership feel a little partial. It would strengthen the piece if some note was taken of structural pressures that can - and most of the works in this area argue that they do - distort the disciplinary mission of educational institutions working at the graduate and post graduate level in terms of teaching and that also undertake research activity.

This struggle over what universities should do, and who should control them often involves the relative power of faculty who tend to be driven by disciplinary imperatives, and administrators or managers who tend to be driven by external (to the teaching and learning and research) drivers. This struggle generates tensions that can lead to toxic leadership developing – because managers can feel embattled and are driven by imperatives that are alien to academic faculty. They can also serve to camouflage toxic leaders who present conflicts they generate with faculty as being caused by faculty failures to recognise external but vital drivers for institutional action and reform.

Therefore, some reflection on this systemic problem would better position the critical analysis and the proposed reform of engineering institutes. Viewed from this perspective conflict between faculty and managers can be seen to be more nuanced than an exclusive focus on leadership toxicity allows. Also, it guards against the tendency to over-emphasise the importance of leadership for the success of organisations, a danger well explained in *Searching for a Corporate Savior – The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Rakesh Khurana). Academic organisations are remarkable for their self-governing potentialities, and the author seems to want to strengthen these, but at the same time asserts that success

depends "on outstanding leadership". It might be more true to state that bad leadership can do irremediable harm to institutions that to expect outstanding leadership, in academia unlocking self-governance might be a better model.

On a more practical level the piece would be stronger if the author told the reader a little more about the place of the Engineering Institute in Indian higher education. It seems they are autonomous from university governance, but linked to universities, and they have a distinct mission established upon their creation. It would help non-insiders if some more explanation was provided. They have Chief Executive Officers, and they have Boards of Governors, and they undertake teaching, research, and consultancy. But anything beyond that is unclear.

More important the actual research process is very unclear. It is described as a study over forty years and seven engineering institutions. Perhaps it is the product of the experience of the author over his career? A reflective piece drawing upon professional experience and expertise, informal and incidental discussion with fellow academics, and perhaps a period of more focussed, but still essentially informal discussion over more recent times, can be a reasonable empirical basis for a piece such as this one. However, if something like this is the foundation of the piece a clearer explanation of this is desirable. To revert to the field of modern university studies such an approach is an important element of all the books noted above.

It is always hard to know when one should impute bad faith to people who behave badly. The author identifies problems of "political support" in the appointment process, "corrupt recruitment", "never-ending support (for toxic leaders) from political leaders based on their caste-based support, bribery, religion, state etc". These are serious problems, but many a poor appointment and performance may be explicable by more mundane failures. Identifying a range of problems, some structural, some corrupt under the governing regulations, and some outright illegal would help. If the toxic leader is being deliberately empowered to divert institutional resources to a client group of the political authorities then some of the proposed remedies will be simply ineffective, and the closed circuit television will certainly be directed at faculty trouble makers.

Finally, the implied assertion that the actions of toxic leaders of engineering institutions are best analysed by recognising them as criminal actions seems misplaced. It is probably due to the use made of theories developed to explain crime (such as the Routine Action Theory). It is possible some toxic leaders do commit crimes as part of their abuse of power. The problem of toxic leadership is not really about this extreme limit of their behaviour. What amounts to workplace bullying and the use of position for personal gain at the expense of the institution is a problem of control of organisational power. Clearly from the potential remedies the author identifies the problem is not one of the occasional "bad apple" which is rotting the barrel of apples. The problem is more structural than this, and includes lack of effective voice in the faculty, weakness of formal governance procedures, a managerial preference for issuing orders over consultative decision making, and a values clash over what factors should drive the activity of the organisation. It might be an idea to look at the problem with an ethical framing of the problems rather than a legal framing.