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Lucy Kellaway: The thankless task of academia

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If I had to write down all the senior management positions I would hate to hold the list would go on forever. All big management jobs are beastly: they are stressful and frustrating and almost always end in failure.

Yet at the top of my list of undesirable jobs would be running Harvard University, where Larry Summers resigned as president last week – just in time to save himself the ignominy of a vote of no confidence. It is not just the top slot at Harvard I would turn down. It is the head of any university, in particular a successful one.

The point of being at the helm of a ship (or organisation) is that you get to steer the thing. In most companies changing course is hard; at big, successful universities it seems impossible.

Not only did Mr Summers get nowhere at Harvard, things don’t seem to be going much better at my old university, Oxford. There, John Hood, an outsider and a New Zealander, has also shown the brass neck to try to shake things up a bit. One of the academics leading the charge against him is Peter Oppenheimer, a clever and amusing man who was an economics tutor of mine. (I remember him pacing up and down his wood panelled study at Christ Church looking restless as I plodded through my essays while he cleaned out his ear with an expensive fountain pen.) Mr Oppenheimer was quoted in The Times this month saying that Hood was “absolutely intolerable.” “He is a very disagreeable man. It is more than just a particular issue, it is the style of governance.”

This sort of plain talk is bracing for its anger and its honesty but it is also childish and petty. It is incomprehensible that anyone in the private sector would make a personal attack like this in public: if they did they would be fired, and rightly so.

Mr Hood may be disagreeable. And he may well have some bad ideas. Yet even if his plans for change were good I very much doubt if he would have the slightest chance of bringing them about. The reason is that academics, especially good ones, make employees from hell. There is little about their abilities, dispositions or the structure of their work that equips them to be components in a modern, flexible organisation. I can think of seven things that make them entirely unsuited for such a part.

■ They are very clever. This is not an advantage in most institutions as the amount that they can think for themselves. (They may not actually be that clever, but they think they are – which may be worse.)

■ Some have spectacularly low levels of emotional intelligence, which is often more important than IQ in getting things done.

■ They are not team players, to put it mildly. Many are introverted. Moreover, the structure of university life means their colleagues (in most subjects save science) are their rivals.

■ Criticism is a way of life. The mind of the academic is trained to pull holes in things. So when presented with a new initiative, they question it and deem it a waste of time as a matter of course.

■ There is no line of authority. In a big company everyone sucks up to their bosses and agrees with them. In a university, there is less to be gained by brown-nosing, so disagreement prevails.

■ They are complacent and have an interest in the status quo that has given them secure jobs and pensions.

■ Because their status largely depends on their research, which may only be understood by a tiny number of people, insecurity, pettiness and bitchiness often result.

The grander the university the bigger the egos and the worse all these factors tend to be.

Things are made worse when one considers the type of person who gets the dean’s (or principal’s) job. They tend to be respected academics who have risen to the top by the power of their research – and the determination of their networking. They may have little notion of how to manage things.

They may also have some of the personality shortfalls of the academics themselves, writ large. Think of Mr Summers. Someone who knows him described him to me as “brilliant, infantile and insensitive”, with an EQ close to zero.

Increasingly, universities are run by people who are trying to embrace what they see as modern management techniques. This can be catastrophic. They import third-rate management fads that the private sector has already junked and implement them badly.

University College London got into a mess last year when it spent £600,000 ($1m) rebranding itself as UCL. Its staff were not amused by a 51-page booklet telling them how to use the new logo, containing edicts that all images should be “vibrant and aspirational” – such as two people jumping into the sea. They were also given two dozen words including “challenging” and “liberalism” that they were encouraged to use when communicating with the outside world. All of which would have been insulting to the intelligence of a humble office worker, let alone an esteemed academic.

The conclusion has to be this: universities function adequately enough when everyone is left to their own devices. Incompetent management seems not to matter, the ship goes on sailing. The trouble comes when drastic change is needed.

In which case there will be many more resignations from unfortunate reformers such as Mr Summers and Mr Hood and many more tears and tantrums before bedtime.