

## **Research, teaching, leadership... What are the demands on today's professors?**

*Norbert Thom*

First let me point out that I will speak here as a professor of business economics with a possibly somewhat more practical approach than representatives of other disciplines.

Having said this, it's probably true of all of today's university professors that they face four essential tasks in their everyday job life. These are: **research**, **teaching**, **administration**, and **providing services to third parties** outside the university. In all of these fields of activity – and this is my central message today – in all of these fields, *leadership skills* are a must.

I will immediately explain what this means. Before, however, I should say that it seems not impossible to reach very high levels of achievement in all of the four mentioned areas simultaneously; one example would be Theodor Kocher, a 19th century professor of medicine and rector of the university of Bern, Nobel prize winner, writer of standard textbooks and outstanding surgeon, all in one person.

So let me return to my theme of leadership and to the first professorial activity I mentioned, **research**. We think we all know what good research entails: a good researcher knows the state of her art; she is creative in raising new questions, in applying and developing research methodologies, knows how to write up her results for publication, and so on. However, there is also that further aspect of *leadership*. What naturally comes to mind here is motivation of employees. It is crucial in managing research projects that one knows how to maintain motivation among the people involved. Applications for grants are sometimes turned down, publications rejected. Research requires stamina and patience. And this leads to my second point: in practice-oriented disciplines (like business economics), researchers must have the ambition to change practice for the better. So while it is surely important to place papers in high-end journals, practical advice should be published in the language of the practitioners concerned. This kind of priority-setting may well require the self-assurance of a good leader.

The second principal activity of professors (at least in Europe) is **teaching**. Here I warmly welcome the fact that teaching quality has become such a prominent topic in recent times. Teaching is largely a matter of communication with a very diverse audience. This audience ranges from students in their first semester to participants in further education courses with PhDs and years of experience in leading positions. In order to teach such diverse audiences to their satisfaction, thorough mastery of one's discipline along with didactical skill form the necessary basis. Where these are topped with the charisma of a good leader, the teacher will distinguish himself from blander colleagues.

The third professorial task is **administration**. From the economist's perspective, a university may be likened to a company that produces masses of human knowledge. As such, this company is highly complex and would be

unmanageable without the managerial activities of professors at their institutes and departments. I have already mentioned the leadership skills required in managing research projects and fostering young researchers. However, one must also take proper care of all the many other employees of the university. Furthermore, professors may hold seats in finance or recruitment committees and as such take momentous decisions – decisions that can ensure or endanger the prosperity of the entire university. In view of all this, universities are called upon to train their professors actively in areas such as organisational management or the leading of all sorts of employees.

The fourth and final task of today's university professors is **providing services** to public and private parties outside academia. By this I don't just mean the professor-cum-surgeon; rather, what I'm thinking of is services that are not obviously expected of the academic institution in question. Examples are expert reports to private or public organisations, appearances in the media, advice to political bodies, and so on. Such activities give professors the opportunity to serve the society that is, at the end of the day, their employer. They are also an opportunity to add to the university's public esteem and thus, in the long term, to help secure financial resources for teaching and research.

To round off these remarks on the more specific demands on today's university professors, let me conclude with one or two more general observations. First, any professor will need a huge amount of intrinsic motivation – without it, she won't be able to do her job with the necessary level of devotion. Second, apart from professorial and leadership skills and intrinsic motivation, certain personality traits and values are required. Surely of importance here are respect for intellectual property, a willingness to learn from mistakes, and a natural urge to engage in the quest for knowledge. People both within and outside university have a keen sense for such personality traits of a teacher and researcher, and will sooner be prepared to accept his or her shortcomings – which, of course, are also always present as well.

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