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Educational Leadership Strategies for Work Harmony and Productivity of Alpha-Oriented Behaviors of Multidisciplinary Faculty in Higher Education Settings

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ABSTRACT

In the dynamic environment of higher education, managing multidisciplinary faculty with dominant or "alpha- oriented" behaviors presents unique challenges to educational leadership. Despite the strategic imperative for collaboration, limited research exists on specific strategies that foster both work harmony and productivity among these assertive groups. This study addresses this gap by exploring the containment and empowerment strategies employed by academic administrators. Using an exploratory qualitative design, the research engages 25 purposively selected academic leaders through one-on-one interviews. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, guided by Trait Activation Theory to understand how leadership behaviors trigger or suppress dominant personality traits. Key findings reveal that impersonal structural mechanisms, specifically shared governance and data-driven dashboards, act as critical neutralizers that de-personalize authority and reduce territoriality. Regarding productivity, the study identifies bounded autonomy, defined as high-trust models operating within co-authored project charters, as the optimal approach for managing alpha faculty. Furthermore, the results highlight the necessity of epistemic translation to resolve disciplinary clashes and structural empathy interventions, such as story circles, to prevent the emotional fatigue associated with distributed leadership. The study concludes that effective leadership translates affective conflict into cognitive conflict, transforming potential disruptors into engines of institutional innovation.

Keywords: Strategies; Work Harmony; Productivity; Alpha-Oriented

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, multidisciplinary collaboration has evolved from an optional advantage to a strategic imperative [1,2]. As institutions aim to address increasingly complex global challenges, faculty members from diverse academic backgrounds are brought together to work in integrated teams. However, this shift has introduced unique interpersonal dynamics, particularly regarding the management of high-performing, dominant individuals, often referred to in organizational psychology as alpha-oriented faculty.

Alpha-oriented behaviors are characterized by high assertiveness, intense competitiveness, and a strong desire for influence [3,4]. In academic settings, these traits are a double-edged sword: they drive individual research productivity and institutional prestige but can simultaneously disrupt team harmony and collaborative governance. The significance of this study lies in this paradox. While educational leadership plays a pivotal role in creating an environment that balances autonomy and authority [5,6], traditional leadership models often fail to contain the friction that arises when multiple alphas from different disciplines are forced to collaborate without a clear hierarchy.

Current research in educational leadership predominantly focuses on general teacher well-being, digital adaptation during crises, and the specific stressors affecting faculty performance [7-10]. While valuable, these

studies often assume a standard distribution of faculty behaviors and do not address the specific strategies required to manage high-dominance profiles. There is a notable gap in empirical research regarding how leaders navigate the specific tension between utilizing alpha energy for productivity and mitigating its potential to erode workplace harmony [11, 12]. Furthermore, existing literature rarely examines this dynamic within multidisciplinary teams, where the lack of shared disciplinary norms makes the alpha struggle for dominance even more acute.

This study addresses this gap by isolating educational leadership strategies as the independent variable and examining their impact on two critical dependent variables: work harmony and faculty productivity. Unlike general leadership studies, this research specifically targets the strategies of containment and empowerment used by administrators to manage alpha-oriented faculty. By engaging 25 academic leaders in an exploratory qualitative inquiry, this study aims to move beyond generic leadership theories to identify specific, actionable mechanisms that allow diverse, assertive faculty teams to function effectively. The findings provide a framework for turning potential interpersonal conflict into sustainable academic productivity.

2. Literature review

Alpha-Oriented Behaviors and Trait Activation. Alpha-oriented faculty are characterized by assertiveness, strong self-direction, competitive drive, and a high need for achievement. These individuals are often central to innovation and research productivity but may clash with collaborative processes, especially in multidisciplinary teams [13]. To understand this dynamic, this study utilizes Trait Activation Theory. Personality traits do not automatically drive behavior; they remain dormant until a specific situation in the workplace triggers them [14]. In academia, the competitive pressure of tenure and research rankings often serves as this trigger. However, leaders can actively improve behavior by identifying and removing the specific workplace distracters or triggers that activate these negative traits [14].

The Risks of High-Performance Dynamics. While alpha behaviors drive output, they carry significant risks for team harmony. Employees who possess a strong sense of entitlement consistently cause damage to knowledge sharing and productivity [14]. Furthermore, the pressure to maintain alpha status can be psychologically damaging. Employees who possess a strong internal desire for perfection are significantly more likely to develop work addiction, a condition exacerbated when they perceive their own manager is also addicted to work [15]. This suggests that leadership styles that purely model grind culture may backfire. However, even when a leader is demanding, the negative impact can be reduced if the organization trains employees on coping strategies, such as seeking social support, managing public speaking anxieties, or balancing administrative burdens with physical wellness activities [14-18].

Transformational to Distributed Leadership. Traditional frameworks like Transformational Leadership, marked by inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, have long been recognized for enhancing performance among proactive faculty [19]. However, multidisciplinary teams increasingly require Distributed Leadership, which positions leadership as a shared practice across the organization [20].

Recent studies reinforce this shift. Distributed leadership builds faculty confidence by creating a culture where professionals can collaborate and take ownership of leadership roles [21-24]. By encouraging open, structured dialogue, this model helps break down strict hierarchies and clarifies professional goals [24]. However, implementation requires nuance. The success of shared leadership depends heavily on the level of trust between administrators and faculty [24] and is most effective when voluntarily adopted rather than forced (Vuori, 2019). Leaders must demonstrate patience, as achieving harmony through distributed leadership is a slow process that requires working through initial disagreements [25].

The Role of Conflict in Harmony and Productivity. A critical challenge for leadership is distinguishing between productive and destructive conflict. Generally, high levels of workplace conflict reduce innovation because they distract employees and create a hostile environment [26]. However, distinct types of conflict yield different results. Generational and disciplinary diversity—particularly involving faculty from technical fields who may operate under distinct professional belief systems or performance anxieties—creates cognitive conflict which boosts innovation, but also affective conflict which destroys it [27-30].

Effective leadership strategies must navigate this divide. While shared leadership fosters healthy debate, it is often ineffective at resolving personal or emotional feuds [30]. Therefore, leaders must use proactive strategies to set clear rules and handle disputes early to prevent conflicts from hurting employee motivation [26]. This aligns with Johnson and Johnson's [31] assertion that positive interdependence, where team members perceive that their success depends on mutual collaboration, is crucial for harmonizing competitive dynamics.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate how educational leadership strategies influence both work harmony and productivity among multidisciplinary faculty members who exhibit alpha-oriented behaviors. The exploratory approach is specifically selected to gain deep, nuanced insights into the complex interpersonal dynamics of high-performing academic teams, allowing for the identification of leadership strategies that are not yet well-defined in existing quantitative literature.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study involves 25 academic leaders or administrators (e.g., deans, department chairs, program heads) from selected higher education institutions. A purposive sampling method was utilized to select participants who possess direct, current experience managing multidisciplinary faculty teams that include individuals displaying alpha-oriented behaviors (defined as assertive, competitive, and high-achieving). This ensures that all participants could speak authoritatively on the specific phenomenon under investigation.

3.3. Instrument

To address the specific behavioral dimensions of the study, a semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers. The questions were constructed based on the theoretical frameworks of Transformational and Distributed Leadership, as well as the behavioral indicators of Alpha traits identified in the literature. The instrument underwent a content validation process by three experts in educational management to ensuring that the questions effectively elicited data on both work harmony and productivity without leading the respondents. The final guide focuses on leadership practices, team dynamics, and conflict resolution strategies.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
1. To identify and analyze educational leadership strategies that influence work harmony among multidisciplinary faculty members with alpha-oriented behaviors in higher education institutions.	1. What educational leadership strategies are commonly practiced in higher education to manage multidisciplinary faculty with alpha-oriented behaviors?
	2. How do these leadership strategies contribute to or hinder work harmony within diverse faculty groups?
	3. What challenges do educational leaders face in promoting harmony among alpha-oriented faculty from different disciplines?
2. To examine the impact of educational leadership strategies on the productivity of alpha-oriented multidisciplinary faculty in higher education.	1.How do alpha-oriented behaviors among faculty affect productivity in multidisciplinary academic teams?
	2. In what ways do leadership strategies enhance or suppress the productive potential of alpha-oriented faculty members?
	3. What leadership approaches are perceived by faculty as most effective in maintaining high productivity without compromising autonomy or authority?

3.4. Data gathering procedure

Data were collected through one-on-one interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing based on participant preference. Prior to the interview, ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription.

3.5. Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [32]. Unlike rigid coding frameworks, this reflexive approach acknowledged the active role of the researcher in interpreting data. The process began with familiarization, where transcripts were read multiple times to identify initial patterns. This was followed by an inductive coding process, where data segments were tagged with descriptive labels rather than pre-existing categories. These codes were then collated into potential themes, reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences, and finally defined and named to construct the narrative presented in the results.

3.6. Research positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. As an academic administrator operating within the higher education sector, the researcher acknowledges an insider positionality. While this shared background facilitated rapport and allowed for a deeper understanding of technical leadership challenges, it also presented the risk of assuming shared meaning. To mitigate potential bias, the researcher employed bracketing techniques, consciously setting aside personal leadership experiences during the interview process. Furthermore, member checking was conducted where participants were given the opportunity to review synthesized themes to ensure their perspectives were accurately represented.

4. Results

Research Objective 1. To identify and analyze educational leadership strategies that influence work harmony among multidisciplinary faculty members with alpha-oriented behaviors in higher education institutions.

Theme 1. Structural De-Escalation via Shared Governance and Data

A primary strategy reported by participants was the use of formal structures to neutralize interpersonal dominance and territorial behavior. Participants emphasized that establishing shared governance protocols, where decision-making power is explicitly distributed across departments, prevents any single alpha figure from monopolizing the narrative. By ensuring that committees are cross-disciplinary and that leadership roles rotate, administrators created an environment where influence was a function of the system rather than individual personality.

To further depersonalize conflict, leaders utilized data-driven decision-making systems. Participants described approaching leadership from a systems design perspective, using clear protocols and objective metrics to track outcomes. By anchoring discussions in dashboard data, such as student success metrics or collaboration outputs, leaders found they could level the playing field, forcing dominant voices to engage with evidence rather than relying on emotional appeals or status. This approach effectively shifted the focus from personal power struggles to institutional goals.

However, participants also noted a specific tension in this approach. While data systems fostered clarity, they sometimes alienated faculty in qualitative or creative disciplines, who felt that rigid metrics failed to capture the nuance of their work. Leaders reported that transparency could inadvertently spotlight inequity if not paired with resource redistribution, requiring a careful balance between standardization and disciplinary respect.

> "My strategy is to establish shared governance structures that include all departments. Giving each discipline a voice in major decisions helps to ease territorial behavior. I also assign leadership roles on a rotating basis so no one feels sidelined, but no one dominates either."

> "Having consistent metrics across departments helps resolve conflicts over resource allocation. It forces clarity. ... When dominant voices try to sway directions emotionally or personally, the system itself becomes the check-and-balance."

Theme 2. Relational Calibration and Ego Management

Beyond structural interventions, participants highlighted the necessity of relational calibration, managing the specific psychological needs of high-performing faculty to prevent disruption. A recurring approach was one-on-one coaching, where leaders engaged dominant faculty individually to align their personal ambitions with institutional goals. Participants noted that alpha-oriented faculty often conflate collaboration with a loss of autonomy, viewing shared work as a dilution of their authority. To counter this, effective leaders reframed collaboration as an opportunity for greater impact rather than a compromise of standards.

Furthermore, leaders found that many alpha faculty desire influence rather than operational control. By explicitly positioning them as thought leaders or mentors rather than administrative managers, administrators

could satisfy their need for recognition without allowing them to dominate operational decisions. This strategy not only neutralized potential power struggles but also channeled assertive energy into mentorship.

Conversely, the failure to address these dynamics, specifically, conflict avoidance, was identified as a critical leadership failure. Participants observed that when department chairs tiptoe around dominant personalities to preserve artificial peace, toxic behavior festers, ultimately demoralizing the broader team. The consensus among effective leaders was that authentic harmony requires addressing friction directly rather than ignoring it.

> "Alpha faculty often tie their identity to their expertise and status, so interdisciplinary collaboration can feel like a threat to that. ... I've found success by framing collaboration as prestige-building rather than compromise, it's all about how the invitation is framed."

> "I've realized that many alpha faculty simply want influence, not control. By positioning them as mentors or thought leaders rather than managers, they can share their expertise without dominating operational decisions."

> "One of the hardest lessons I learned was that harmony doesn't mean silence, it means healthy tension, honestly managed."

Theme 3. Navigating Disciplinary and Ideological Clashes

In multidisciplinary settings, participants reported that work harmony is frequently disrupted by fundamental differences in academic epistemology, how different fields define knowledge and proof. Leaders described significant friction when faculty from positivist disciplines (e.g., STEM) collaborated with those from interpretivist fields (e.g., Humanities). These clashes often appeared personal but were rooted in deep-seated disciplinary training. Participants noted that alpha behaviors in this context manifest as intellectual dominance, where one discipline attempts to impose its methodological standards on another.

To mitigate this, effective leaders mediated these conflicts by establishing a shared language before collaborative work began. One participant recounted a specific intervention involving a conflict between an engineering professor and a philosophy colleague, where the former demanded empirical proof for theoretical claims.

This finding suggests that in multidisciplinary teams, leadership must go beyond conflict resolution to perform epistemic translation, helping faculty understand the validity of differing academic paradigms to prevent intellectual dominance from eroding team cohesion.

> "We often deal with intense ideological clashes, especially when humanities meet STEM. Alpha faculty in different fields see the world through fundamentally different lenses."

> "The philosopher was offering nuance and theoretical framing, not experimental data. Both were respected faculty, but their disciplinary languages clashed. It took several sessions of moderated discussion before they even acknowledged each other's legitimacy."

Research Objective 2. To examine the impact of educational leadership strategies on the productivity of alpha-oriented multidisciplinary faculty in higher education.

Theme 4. Bounded Autonomy and High-Trust Models

Participants consistently reported that alpha-oriented faculty exhibit the highest productivity under a high-trust, high-expectation model. This approach, described by participants as servant leadership with boundaries, involves leaders defining clear deliverables and deadlines while granting faculty significant operational freedom. Leaders noted that micromanagement is particularly detrimental to alpha faculty, often triggering resistance or disengagement; conversely, when faculty feel their autonomy is respected, they hold themselves accountable to higher standards than those imposed by administration.

However, participants emphasized that autonomy must not be mistaken for a lack of structure. Unmanaged autonomy was cited as a risk; without clear frameworks, dominant personalities may override collective goals. Therefore, effective productivity is achieved through bounded autonomy, where expectations are co-constructed at the start of a term, allowing the leader to step back during execution.

> "Faculty respond best when they feel their leader works with them, not over them. I position myself as a facilitator not a micromanager but I draw clear lines around deadlines and institutional priorities."

> "I use a model I call 'trust first, check later.' Faculty are treated as professionals until proven otherwise. ... Trust without clarity just creates confusion. We co-define deliverables at the start of each term... After that, I step back."

Theme 5. Distributed Leadership to Sustain Momentum

To maintain productivity without concentrating power, leaders employed distributed leadership strategies, specifically the rotation of chair positions and task force leadership. This practice serves a dual function: it prevents burnout among single leaders and inhibits the formation of silos of influence where dominant faculty might otherwise entrench their authority. Participants observed that when leadership roles rotate, faculty develop greater empathy for administrative burdens and become less territorial, leading to more sustainable collaborative output.

However, participants acknowledged that this strategy carries risks regarding consistency. Not all faculty are equally prepared or willing to lead, and some respondents noted instances of emotional fatigue where faculty disengaged during their rotation. Despite this, the consensus remained that distributed models prevent the stagnation associated with permanent hierarchies. As one leader noted, this approach fosters equity by ensuring that even their most senior faculty take on roles they haven't held before, and early-career scholars are mentored into leadership early.

> "I rotate leadership responsibilities across sub-groups or task forces. It flattens hierarchy and gives each team ownership over outcomes. ... Fixed leadership roles often concentrate power in the same hands. By rotating chairs and coordinators, we disrupt that cycle."

Theme 6. Emotional Intelligence as a Productivity Guardrail

Finally, the data indicated that emotional intelligence (EQ) is not merely a relational asset but a structural necessity for sustaining productivity in alpha-dominant teams. Participants warned that unchecked alpha behaviors frequently lead to the silencing of quieter, innovative voices, creating idea silos where only the loudest perspectives are heard. This dynamic was identified as a direct threat to the productive potential of the group, as it leads to the withdrawal of talent and the loss of diverse insights.

To counter this, effective leaders integrated EQ-focused interventions directly into their operational workflow. One notable strategy was the implementation of "story circles" or collaborative storytelling

exercises designed to build interpersonal trust before intellectual work begins. By humanizing the team members, leaders reduced the likelihood of aggressive posturing.

Additionally, leaders reported using formal feedback mechanisms, such as 360-degree reviews and EQ assessments, to provide dominant faculty with a mirror of their impact on the team. Participants noted that when alpha faculty were presented with anonymous peer feedback regarding their behavior, they often recalibrated, transforming from disruptors into effective collaborators.

> "I've seen quieter members shut down completely in the presence of unchecked dominance. And over time, that leads to loss of talent and morale .... In humanities-STEM collaborations, I've seen this result in idea silos."

> "We implemented 'story circles', monthly 45-minute sessions where colleagues speak from personal experience (not theory or strategy). It re-humanizes faculty and helps dominant voices connect emotionally, not just intellectually."

> "I've seen alpha types either flourish or implode depending on how emotionally intelligent the environment is. ... When dominant faculty finally see how others experience their leadership, it opens the door to change."

5. Discussion

This study extends Trait Activation Theory within the context of higher education. Serenko [14] posits that personality traits remain dormant until triggered by situational cues. While existing literature suggests that competitive environments trigger negative alpha behaviors like entitlement and territoriality, this study identifies specific leadership mechanisms that can de-activate these negative traits without suppressing productivity. The findings regarding data-driven decision-making suggest that alpha faculty do not resist authority per se, but rather resist subjective authority. When leaders utilize objective dashboards, they remove the social dominance trigger, effectively converting a potential interpersonal conflict into a neutral analysis of metrics. This implies that in academic leadership, structural rigidity, when applied transparently, does not stifle autonomy but rather protects it by creating a neutralizer for personality clashes.

The findings also offer a nuanced perspective on distributed leadership. While Spillane [20] and Zhang et al. [24] frame distributed leadership primarily as a tool for empowerment and capacity building, this study suggests that for alpha-oriented teams, it functions primarily as a containment strategy. By rotating leadership roles, administrators prevent the solidification of silos of influence. However, contrary to the optimism in Zhang's model, this study highlights a critical limitation: emotional fatigue. The resistance to rotating leadership observed in this study suggests that high-performing faculty may view the service aspect of distributed leadership not as empowerment, but as a distraction from their core competency. This aligns with Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė's [15] warning about work addiction; forcing highly specialized alphas into generalist administrative roles requires careful calibration to avoid burnout.

This research deepens the understanding of conflict transformation in multidisciplinary teams. Wang and Duan [30] distinguish between cognitive conflict and affective conflict. The results of this study illustrate the mechanism by which leaders can toggle between these two states: epistemic translation. The friction observed between STEM and Humanities faculty confirms that much of what appears to be alpha dominance is actually a clash of disciplinary paradigms. By using interventions like story circles and moderated shared language sessions, leaders effectively strip the affective layer from the conflict, leaving only the cognitive

debate. This validates the assertion by Bensouda et al. [26] that proactive dispute handling preserves motivation, but adds the specific insight that in multidisciplinary settings, conflict resolution must be intellectual as much as it is emotional.

Based on the findings, this study proposes a three-tiered implementation framework for academic leaders managing alpha-oriented multidisciplinary teams. First, to manage the entitlement and territoriality identified by Serenko [14], leaders should implement systematized de-escalation through impersonal data structures. Rather than relying on hierarchical authority, which often triggers resistance in high-status faculty, administrators should utilize dashboard systems that display objective metrics, such as student success rates and publication counts, to guide decision-making. By shifting the debate from "who has more status" to "what does the data say," the leader neutralizes the alpha trigger of social dominance. This confirms the finding that alpha faculty accept authority when it is evidence-based rather than hierarchical. However, leaders must proactively re-humanize this data for Humanities faculty to avoid the cognitive conflict becoming affective, as warned by Wang and Duan [30].

Second, to maximize productivity without inviting chaos, leaders must operationalize the servant leadership with boundaries model through Bounded Autonomy Charters. At the onset of any multidisciplinary project, teams should be required to co-author a Project Charter that defines deliverables, role rotation schedules, and conflict resolution protocols. This mechanism creates the positive interdependence recommended by Johnson and Johnson [31], allowing alpha faculty the autonomy they crave, thereby reducing the work addiction risks identified by Morkevičiūtė and Endriulaitienė [15], while embedding the structural guardrails necessary to prevent them from overriding collective goals.

Finally, given that distributed leadership can lead to emotional fatigue, leaders must institutionalize Structural Empathy mechanisms rather than relying on chance interactions. The study recommends the scheduling of monthly story circles, non-strategic meetings dedicated to sharing personal narratives or professional challenges outside of immediate tasks. This intervention directly addresses the silencing effect of dominant behavior by creating a structured space for vulnerability, breaking down the invulnerability mask often worn by alpha faculty. This aligns with Bensouda et al.'s [26] finding that proactive dispute handling prevents hostile environments, turning a group of competitive individuals into a cohesive unit capable of sustaining high-performance pressure.

6. Limitations and future research

While this study offers a robust framework for managing alpha-oriented faculty, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the exploratory qualitative design, relying on a purposive sample of 25 academic leaders, precludes statistical generalization. The findings reflect the lived experiences of administrators in specific multidisciplinary contexts and may not fully capture the nuances of leadership in varying institutional types, such as purely research-intensive universities or vocational colleges. Future research should employ quantitative methods, such as structural equation modeling, to empirically test the correlation between the specific leadership strategies identified and faculty productivity metrics across a broader population.

The study relies primarily on the perspective of leaders. While this provides deep insight into administrative strategy, it does not capture the direct experience of the alpha-oriented faculty themselves. There is a risk that what leaders perceive as effective containment might be experienced by faculty as bureaucratic suppression. Future studies would benefit from a dyadic design that interviews both leaders and their faculty members to identify gaps in perception.

While this study integrated Trait Activation Theory, it focused predominantly on the activation of competitive traits. Future scholarship could expand this theoretical lens to examine how leadership strategies might inadvertently activate other latent traits, such as anxiety or withdrawal, particularly among non-alpha faculty in these high-intensity teams. Investigating the longitudinal impact of "story circles" and other emotional intelligence interventions on faculty retention would also provide valuable data for long-term institutional policy.

7. Conclusion

This study examined educational leadership strategies that promote work harmony and productivity among alpha-oriented multidisciplinary faculty in higher education. Moving beyond generic leadership approaches, the research confirms that effective management of high-performing faculty requires a dual strategy of structural containment and relational empowerment. Key findings reveal that impersonal mechanisms, specifically shared governance and data-driven dashboards, act as critical neutralizers for territorial behavior. By shifting authority from hierarchy to objective metrics, leaders can de-activate the competitive social triggers identified in Trait Activation Theory, thereby reducing interpersonal conflict.

Furthermore, the study refines the understanding of productivity by introducing the concept of bounded autonomy. While alpha-oriented faculty thrive under high-trust models, sustainable output is best achieved when autonomy is defined within strict, co-authored project charters. The findings also highlight that distributed leadership is not merely an empowerment tool but a necessary containment strategy to prevent silos of influence, though it carries the risk of emotional fatigue if not managed through structural empathy interventions like "story circles."

Ultimately, the study concludes that work harmony in multidisciplinary settings is not the absence of conflict, but the successful translation of affective conflict into cognitive conflict. By mastering epistemic translation and fostering a climate of high-trust accountability, educational leaders can transform the disruptive potential of alpha faculty into a powerful engine for institutional innovation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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