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Leadership in higher education – its evolution and potential

A unique role facing critical challenges

Bryan L. Smith and Aaron W. Hughey

Abstract: *Leadership is a key ingredient in the ultimate success or failure of any organization. In this article the authors review the research on leadership in general and then focus on how leadership in the academic world is similar to, yet distinct from, leadership in the private sector. Included in this discussion are a description of how leadership in colleges and universities has evolved, the characteristics that are unique to higher education together with their implications for effective leadership, and consideration of the immense challenges academic leaders face as they attempt to keep higher education responsive to the needs of business and industry. The authors also address the emergence of student affairs administration and the current crisis in academic leadership.*

Keywords: *leadership; academic leadership; educational leadership; fundamental leadership practices; student affairs administration*

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Today's leaders, regardless of whether they are in the corporate world or higher education, face a myriad of challenges that would have been inconceivable in a previous era. Increasing competition precipitated by the proliferation of free market capitalism, shifting population demographics fuelled by enhanced mobility, and seemingly endless technological and cultural evolution are having a profound impact on the fundamental nature of both business and academia. Yet whether the goal is to generate a profit or educate students, leadership constitutes one of the most critical

determinants of ultimate success or failure. The difference between excellence and mediocrity, or even survival and extinction, is often a direct reflection of the leadership within an organization (Birnbbaum, 1988).

At the same time, leadership has always been a somewhat ambiguous concept: there appears to be no single, concise definition of it that encompasses all of its various manifestations. Many researchers have attempted to describe effective leaders (Bennis, 1989; Bolman and Deal, 1997; Clawson, 1999; Peters and

Waterman, 1982). In fact, there are probably as many definitions of leadership as there have been individuals who have studied the concept (Hoy and Miskel, 1991; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 1994). As Rost (1991, p 4) observes, leadership is '... one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth'. Maddux (2002, p 41) adds that the bulk of the available research on leadership is marked by confusion and dominated by trendy nonsense.

Until fairly recently, most leadership studies focused on either business environments or the military (Birnbaum, 1988). In this context, it was generally accepted that two of the most critical elements in any management situation were the personality and the leadership style of the individual who assumed the role of leader (Banning, 1980). Many psychologists contend that basic personality structures develop early in life and that, for most people, very few significant personality changes occur after the age of seven or eight (Messer and Millar, 2005). In addition, Kouzes and Posner (1995) found that people tended to develop a specific leadership style based on their individual experiences, education and training. In any event, effective leaders seem to have an intrinsic understanding of the relationship between their personality and their ability to be successful in leadership roles.

Historical and theoretical foundations

Many of the earliest inquiries into the nature of leadership centred around the notion that some individuals seem to be born with characteristics and traits which enable them to lead better than others (Slater *et al*, 1994; Yukl, 1994). Until about the middle of the last century, most research into leadership was concerned with identifying the unique attributes of individuals who were considered to be effective leaders (Brown, 1997; Kerr, 1984; Kerr and Gade, 1986; Stogdill, 1948; Vaughan, 1986). An individual's intelligence, personality and physical appearance, for example, were seen as characteristics that had a direct impact on leadership potential and ability. As Bennis and Nanus (1985, p 5) observed, the ability to lead was '... vested in a very limited number of people whose destiny made them leaders. Those of the right stuff could lead; all others must be led.' Ultimately, though, it became clear that the identification of specific traits and characteristics common to all successful leaders was virtually impossible (Bass, 1981; Yukl, 1994).

During this same period, some researchers attempted to study leadership by exploring the roles and responsibilities of managerial work and comparing the behavioural traits of effective and ineffective

leaders. These 'behaviourists' investigated the most effective approaches to leadership by examining the particular actions and patterns of behaviour employed by individuals in leadership positions (Van der Veer, 1991). In essence, they wanted to identify what leaders did to accomplish their goals successfully within an organization. Their primary objective was to describe and quantify the specific behaviours that were consistently exhibited by effective leaders.

In addition to the behaviourists, other researchers favoured what came to be known as the 'situational' approach to analysing leadership. This involved assessing the contextual factors related to leadership, such as the purpose of the organization, the distinguishing characteristics of the followers and the constraints imposed by the external environment (Murphy, 2002; Yukl, 1994). According to this theory, successful leaders were those who tended to adapt their approach to a situation according to its unique circumstances. In other words, actions or behaviours that might be considered appropriate in one environment could have limited effectiveness in another setting, given the different conditions prevailing in the alternative situation.

A fundamentally different school of thought on leadership emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century. According to many researchers leadership, and leaders, could be categorized as either 'transactional' or 'transformational' (Bass, 1999). 'Transactional' leaders were those who focused on needs and rewards as sources of motivation, whereas 'transformational' leaders not only understood and recognized their followers' needs but also attempted to raise those needs to higher levels of motivation to enable people to fulfil their true potential (Bass, 1999; Silins, 1994). Goldring and Greenfield (2002) found that transformational leadership was more inclusive and required more highly developed skills and abilities than the more directive and less invitational transactional approach. Schein (1992) and Yukl (1994) reported that transactional leaders were perceived to be effective when they visibly and definitively responded to a crisis in a manner that clearly improved the situation. Transformational leaders were perceived to be more proficient in developing supportive relationships with those around them and in nurturing high-performing organizations (Schein, 1992).

Five fundamental leadership practices

Drawing extensively on the work of their predecessors, Kouzes and Posner (2002; 1995) developed a widely-accepted theory of leadership that has, at its core, the nature of the relationship between

leaders and their followers. It was discovered that leaders who consistently demonstrated extraordinary accomplishments within their organizations on a long-term basis tended to follow certain well-defined practices. Specifically, Kouzes and Posner (2002) found that effective leaders seemed to be almost universally proficient in five different categories of leadership 'practices'.

The first fundamental leadership practice is to '*challenge the process*', which implies that successful leaders are willing to take calculated risks (Kouzes and Posner, 2002; Whetten and Cameron, 1985). Effective leaders also encourage and motivate their followers by providing challenges that constitute opportunities for personal growth and development. They view a failed attempt as a learning opportunity.

The second fundamental leadership practice is to '*inspire a shared vision*', and this denotes the importance of precipitating a collective commitment to the future of the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). Effective leaders help their followers connect to, and become supportive of, a common mission.

'*Enable others to act*', the third fundamental leadership practice, refers to the importance of empowering followers in order to nurture true collaboration (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). Successful leaders develop trusting and participatory relationships which inherently involve and value everyone in the organization (Goldring and Greenfield, 2002). 'Without constituents to enlist, a prospective leader is all alone, taking no one anywhere. Without leaders, constituents have no energizer to ignite their passions, no followers, no compass by which to be guided.' (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p 30.)

The fourth fundamental leadership practice, '*model the way*', means that successful leaders consistently and conscientiously project an appropriate example for their followers (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). For example, leaders tend to model effective leadership when they are seen as dealing with complex issues in a thoughtful and incremental manner. Furthermore, the values of the leader must be consistent with those of their followers. 'Leaders who advocate values that aren't representative of the collective won't be able to mobilize people to act as one.' (Kouzes and Posner, 2002, p 212.)

The fifth fundamental leadership practice is to '*encourage the heart*', which refers to the importance of recognizing and celebrating the efforts and accomplishments of followers (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). Rather than focusing solely on formal rewards, effective leaders are quick to share the credit with others and to compliment followers in order to validate their contributions, enhance their credibility and further

motivate them. As Kouzes and Posner (1995, p 272) observe, '... this is one of the defining characteristics of a leader, one of the things that make constituents willing to be led: that person has our best interests at heart and wants us to be as successful as possible'.

Academic leadership

According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), effective leaders understand the people with whom they work – their roles, the function of their specific jobs and the larger organizational structure. This is especially true in higher education. Leadership in academia is complicated by the dynamic social, economic and policy contexts in which most colleges and universities operate (Goldring and Greenfield, 2002). To be successful in higher education, leaders must be intuitively cognizant of the unique factors that characterize most campus environments.

It is important to keep in mind that higher education, compared to its societal counterparts, has yet to evolve into a mature industry. In reality, most colleges and universities are complex and unique entities, although they do share some common characteristics with respect to their organization (Bensimon *et al*, 1989). In an effort to understand and augment institutional effectiveness and raise standards in higher education, researchers have described several different organizational structures, including the simple structure, the machine bureaucracy, the divisionalized form and the adhocracy (Bolman and Deal, 1997; Mintzberg, 1979). Conceptually, each has strengths and weaknesses: it is unclear which is more ideally suited for a contemporary academic institution.

Obviously, much of the literature on leadership is as applicable to higher education as it is to the private sector, although effective leadership within such a dynamic environment can be very challenging. Studies that focus exclusively on leadership in higher education are somewhat sparse, with most of the inquiries centred around the role of the college or university president (Fisher *et al*, 1988; Plowman, 1991). It is generally accepted that contemporary academic leaders need to be proficient in assessing student needs, conducting comprehensive evaluations of programmes and services and providing aggressive leadership within a more democratic and legalistic framework (Blimling and Whitt, 1999). Enrolment fluctuations, rising costs and budgetary restraints, evolving delivery systems, increased litigation and a host of other concerns have also accentuated the need for effective leadership in higher education (Sandeem, 1991).

As the new millennium progresses, educational leaders will be constantly challenged to be

more effective in strategic planning, modifying organizational structures and bringing more control and flexibility to budgeting processes and staffing patterns. In fact, '... effective leaders are often described as individuals who are able to control resources in a way that organizes the organization to effectively meet its goals' (Ginsburg, 1997, p 27). Moreover, leadership effectiveness in academia is increasingly measured by the success of the organization in performing tasks and accomplishing goals and in relating to the attitudes of others (Yukl, 1994).

Leadership, teaching and research

At the outset of the twentieth century, the focus of academic staff began to move away from the student, the 'personal' side of education, towards the discipline, the 'academic' side (Smith, 2004). Due primarily to the rising influence of the German model of higher education, 'the role, expectations and responsibilities of faculty changed accordingly as an increased emphasis on research and specialization began to overshadow the importance of personal growth, general studies and ethical dimensions of higher education' (Kuh *et al*, 1987, p 253). As Kliebard (1995) cautioned, however, the standard for what is taught should be determined not by subject matter but by values.

Indeed, with the decentralization of many of today's colleges and universities, the institutional focus has moved much more explicitly from teaching to research (Smith, 2004). Coleman (1981) observes that it is common for many university departments to operate almost completely independently of any direction from a central office. Part of this change is due, at least in part, to an increasing reliance on governments and other outside agencies as funding sources for research projects. As a group, research faculty often see themselves as 'independent contractors' as opposed to 'employees'. As such, their loyalties can be more directed to the origin of their financial backing than to the institution that employs them.

There is a direct relationship between teaching and learning and the leadership, administration and organization of the university (Goldring and Greenfield, 2002). Smylie *et al* (2002) emphasize the importance of collective versus individual leadership and the role of the faculty member as both scholar and teacher. Taylor (2000) argues that the primary purpose of an academic leader is to make teaching possible. 'Leaders', he suggests, 'are creators of the conditions within which the staff work' (p 41). Yet McConville (2000) and McInnes (1999) have observed that colleges and universities seem to be becoming less satisfying places to work. As a result, Taylor (2000) argues, avenues for

creating better working conditions in higher education should be aggressively pursued.

Academic leaders are often caught between the conflicting interests of faculty members and administration. That is, they have to look in two different directions – one being the mission of the academic discipline and the second the larger mission of the institution (Smylie *et al*, 2002). Gmelch (2000) likens their dilemma to that of Janus, the Roman deity with two faces looking in two directions at the same time. Leaders find themselves oscillating between the desires of the faculty and the needs of the administration. They have to adopt a facilitative leadership style when working with faculty members in the academic realm and a more traditional/authoritative style when working with staff in the administrative realm (Gmelch, 1995).

Effective leadership in higher education has a great deal to do with balance. The Ecosystem Model (Banning, 1980) suggests that academic leaders, as factors in the campus environment, will be ineffective if they experience a poor person–environment fit in their own professional lives. When there is a misfit in the work environment there will be '... job dissatisfaction, depression, physiological strain, and other symptoms of poor mental health' (French, 1974, p 70). In any event, over the past two decades pressures have begun to transform the once unquestioning academic administrator into an individual struggling to find a balance between total academic immersion and a fulfilled private life (Gmelch, 2000).

Student affairs administration

Out of the changing climate in higher education a new profession was born, called 'student affairs administration'. Its creation was precipitated by the huge growth in colleges and universities that followed the First World War. US institutions responded to the shift in faculty interests noted previously by designating individuals to facilitate student-related issues (Allen and Garb, 1993). These administrators, who usually held the title of 'Dean', were given responsibility for managing various campus programmes and services, including academic and career counselling, financial aid, student employment and student health (American Council on Education, 1937). The early Deans were pioneers in student affairs administration and laid the foundation for today's chief student affairs officers.

To reiterate, studies on leadership in higher education are relatively rare, and investigations into leadership within student affairs administration are virtually non-existent (Clement and Rickard, 1992; Peterson and Mets, 1987). Randall and Globetti (1992)

reported that college presidents typically wanted student affairs administrators with personal and interpersonal competencies in the areas of integrity, conflict resolution and decisiveness. They also wanted individuals who were supportive of the central academic mission of the institution, which was seen as paramount. Anderson's (1998) profile of effective, exemplary student affairs leaders included their specific leadership styles and behaviours, whether or not their decision making was information-based, their human relations and communication skills and their genuine concern for students as exemplified through their role as student advocates.

Student affairs administration and its function in higher education continues to evolve as the overall environment continues to change in response to both internal and external catalysts (Morgan, 1997). Direct supervision, historically the most common form of leadership in the majority of student affairs divisions, is far less common today because of the size and complex nature of the organizational structures emerging in academia. Some smaller colleges, nevertheless, still practice this approach – with all department heads reporting directly to the chief student affairs officer (Clement and Rickard, 1992; Sandeen, 1991).

With the more defined development of the field in challenging times, student affairs administration has gained in value and integrity (Manning, 1996). Much of this enhanced credibility can be traced directly to the leadership provided by student affairs administrators (Sandeen, 1991). As was the case with other academic leaders, student affairs administrators also play the dual role of educator and leader. As educators, they communicate their vision of how developmental opportunities can be pursued and attempt to structure an environment that is conducive to enriching the quality of life for students. As leaders, they motivate and guide their staff, influence others in the institution to be more student-oriented and work to secure the resources necessary for the provision of even more effective student services.

The crisis in educational leadership

On college campuses around the world, academic leaders faced tremendous challenges during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were called on to meet the demands associated with an unprecedented expansion of higher education. It was during this period that higher education first came to be viewed as a 'growth industry', subject to the same economic and market forces as any other societal entity (Hughey, 2003; Maddux, 2002). Slaughter (2001, p 23) points out that it was not until the 1980s that it became commonplace

for university presidents to refer to themselves as 'chief executive officers', denoting the emergence of a new relationship not only with the university but also with the wider community.

In many respects higher education can be characterized as being in the midst of an identity crisis. For most of its history academia has considered itself somewhat transcendent of the cultural, political and economic forces that influence and shape the rest of society and its institutions (Hughey, 2003). Since the middle of the last century, however, a college education has come to be viewed as more egalitarian than meritocratic – in other words, it has come to be seen as a right rather than a privilege. As an unintended consequence of this philosophical and perceptual shift, many now consider colleges and universities to be businesses, not unlike the other commercial concerns with which they are familiar.

Maddux (2002, p 41) observes that this metamorphosis has contributed to a '... crisis in educational leadership'. Gmelch (2000, p 581) supports this assessment:

'Around the world scholars and administrators alike speak about a great leadership crisis in higher education. Blue-ribbon commissions and executive reports call for bolder and better college and university leadership. The search for solutions to the leadership dilemma leads us to thousands of leadership studies, most of which are contradictory and inconclusive.'

Maddux (2002, p 42) adds that '... the popular and academic literature is marked by so much confusion, disarray, shoddy thinking, and charlatanism that the serious reader might be tempted to dismiss the concept of leadership as unworthy of serious consideration'. Wood (2000, p 49) also argues that '... the future of higher education is at stake' if nothing is done to address the current crisis of leadership.

Perhaps Gmelch (2000, p 1) captures the essence of the problem when he writes that:

'in order to be a leader in higher education, one must be a 'dove' of peace intervening among warring factions that are causing destructive turbulence in the college, a dragon driving away both internal and external forces that threaten the college, and a diplomat guiding, inspiring, and encouraging people who live and work in the college environment.'

Given the current situation, it is interesting to note that US presidents and chief student affairs officers have the highest turnover rates among all university

executive leaders (Sandeen, 1991; Rickard, 1982). They obviously constitute the most visible, as well as the most controversial, leadership positions on any college campus (Sandeen, 1991). Although the tangible rewards associated with these roles can be significant, the stress and anxiety they generate can also be overwhelming and can lead to premature burnout. Leadership in the academic world is becoming much more complicated than it was, and few preparation programmes exist to equip individuals to meet the emerging challenges.

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that there is no one 'right' way to conceptualize leadership or to become a leader. On a fundamental level, individuals are able to lead when they have people who are willing to follow. Jarvis (1999, p 581), in the *International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education*, defines leadership as '(1) the ability of a person to influence the actions, behaviour, beliefs and feelings of another person or persons and gain their cooperation and (2) the ability to attract followers to the performance of a task'.

Leadership can also be viewed, at least in many organizations, as a continuous struggle between competing values and unattractive options. Leadership has a lot to do with taking action – confronting situations as they occur and dealing with them in the most effective and efficient manner possible (Cuban, 1996; 2001; Glatter, 1996). At the same time, leadership sometimes involves taking a stand that may be unpopular with many followers. Certainly, effective leadership is essential if the obstacles to change are to be overcome (Davis and Harden, 2002).

The relationship between effective leadership and the ability of higher education to meet the needs of business and industry successfully has never been more clearly understood than it is today (Murphy and Louis, 1999; Goldring and Greenfield, 2002). The environment in which academia operates is increasingly political, and the stakes – economic and otherwise – have never been higher for colleges and universities, as well as for society at large. It is imperative that leaders emerge who can successfully negotiate the turbulent times that lie ahead and can reinvent academia so that it retains its relevance in a world which desperately needs what higher education has to offer.

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