



## Administrative Leadership

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### Abstract

This paper reviews current thinking on organizational leadership generally and academic leadership in particular. In the past quarter-century, views about the essence of leadership have shifted from a hierarchical view that leadership flows from a leadership position to a much more lateral view that leadership roles are available to everyone. Recent research on leadership in higher education largely mirrors the more general leadership literature: significantly more attention is now being paid to collective, context-dependent, and relational approaches. The higher education leader drawn to these new models is, however, also pulled in the opposite direction, toward an increasingly managerial culture requiring greater managerial expertise. Academic leaders are thus faced with unique challenges. Resolving them will require the academic leader to: balance lateral with administrative leadership, encourage cultures of reflection in their academic units, and recognize and take advantage of the power of networks.

What does it take to be an effective leader in higher education? The answer may be as simple as scoring well on IDEA's "Feedback for Administrators" survey, which consists of a set of behaviors corresponding to effective leadership, such as "Communicating a visionary plan for the future" and "Establishing sound priorities." The survey has been shown to be an effective tool for helping administrators diagnose their leadership strengths and challenges. But, just like student ratings can help a faculty member identify priorities for improvement, but don't—and can't—by themselves define effective teaching, so it is that good leadership cannot be defined solely as a set of good leadership behaviors.

Research on what constitutes effective leadership parallels in many ways the research on effective teaching. In both instances, much of the research in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century started with the assumption that good professional practice is essentially a set of good behaviors. While behavioral theories of leadership still have some currency, the past few decades have witnessed a great deal of innovative research and theorizing, most of which has emphasized the importance of context: that what is effective leadership in one setting may not be effective leadership in another. In this paper, I'll review current thinking on organizational leadership, narrow the focus to leadership in academic settings, and finally suggest some common themes that underlie the research findings. Because I've taught in a leadership program for many years

and worked with leaders from virtually all walks of life, I'll focus as well on insights that I think are most useful for practice.

### A short update on leadership theory

In his classic book titled simply *Leadership* (1978), James MacGregor Burns wrote, "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (p. 2). If it's true, as many have asserted over the years, that leadership is the single most written-about topic in the history of human civilization, then one might expect to find some common understandings about such a complex phenomenon. But Burns' wry observation is nearly as true today as it was back in the 70s. There are several reasons why this is so.

The first is epistemological: that is, how we know what we know about leadership. A close look at the knowledge base of what broadly constitutes empirical "leadership research" reveals a reliance on two major approaches: the anecdotal, at one extreme, and the quantitative, or post-positivist, at the other. The anecdotal method is familiar to anyone who has browsed through "airport books" on leadership: the chief executive or management consultant sifts through his or her experience and comes up with a list of principles that a good leader should follow, or a list of pitfalls the good leader should avoid. (The parallels in higher education are

memoirs written by former college presidents.) Anecdotal evidence is the major source of wisdom in the more iconic leadership books as well, from Chester Barnard's classic *Functions of the Executive* (1938) to Ron Heifetz' *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (1994). Perhaps as a reaction to the "unscientific" nature of such works, academic research on leadership has leaned toward the quantitative, in the form of correlational studies and experimental designs, with an emphasis on prediction and control of operationalized constructs, regardless of context. Both of these traditions certainly have a place. Each has contributed significantly to our knowledge base about leadership. But each also has serious limitations. Anecdotal evidence is so highly contextual that generalizability is difficult; quantitative studies, on the other hand, offer little to the practitioner hungry for pragmatic advice, or to the scholar who yearns for a deeper and more textured understanding of leaders' lived experiences.

A second reason stems in part from the first. Rost (1993) has written that traditional leadership scholars and theories

... have been almost totally concerned with the peripheries of leadership: traits, personality characteristics, "born or made" issues, greatness, group facilitation, goal attainment, effectiveness, contingencies, situations, goodness, style, and, above all, the management of organizations, public and private. These peripheral elements are, for the most part, visible and countable, susceptible to statistical manipulation, accessible in terms of causality probabilities, and usable to train people in the habits of doing what those in the know may think is the right thing. (p. 3)

All of these traditional theories, noted Rost, ignore the processes in which leadership occurs and the nature of the relationship between leaders and those they wish to lead. Too few scholars until recently have been willing to open up that black box.

A third reason is more cultural and political, having to do with changing images of who leaders are and what they should do. Communities and organizations are much more complex and interdependent than they used to be (or maybe more appropriately, were *assumed* to be). As long as problems were seen as technical problems and only those in positions of formal authority exercised leadership, it made sense to isolate traits and behaviors that led to getting things done. In the past quarter century, however, notions about the essence of leadership have shifted from a hierarchical view that leadership flows from a leadership *position* to a much more lateral view that leadership roles are available to everyone. Burns' book (1978) was one of the first to describe the shift from a "command and control" vision of leadership to one that is more inclusive and participatory. In his discussion of "transformative leadership," Burns suggested that by focusing on shared goals and values, leaders and followers would raise one another to higher levels

of motivation and morality and thus engage in a conscious transformation process. As is true of many seminal ideas, Burns' notions of transformative leadership have often been hijacked by organizational leaders—including many campus administrators—and used in ways he never intended, namely to attempt to "transform" the organization in a mostly unilateral fashion. For reasons that should be clear later in this paper, attempts at unilateral transformation in higher education nearly always fail (see Birnbaum, 1989, 1992; Eckel, Green, & Hill, 1999-2001).

The other big idea from the late 1970s is "servant leadership" (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf's vision was much like Burns' except that he focused even more on the emancipatory needs of followers. His view was that leadership should at its core attend to matters of inequity and social injustice. Servant leadership has influenced many thinkers, writers, and social leaders, but for most people it has been more of a guiding philosophy than a guide to practice—and despite its noble ideals, servant leadership, like transformative leadership, has an implicit sense of *noblesse oblige* about it. Dan Wheeler (2012) has written a fine book adapting servant leadership principles to higher education contexts.

These two seminal ideas—both emphasizing that real excellence in leadership is a process of engagement between leaders and followers, with each affecting the other—were critical to the paradigm shift we're seeing today. The tipping point that left solely hierarchical views of leadership behind forever, theoretically if not always in practice, was probably Ronald Heifetz' 1994 book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. In it, Heifetz introduced the notion of what he calls *adaptive work*, or the learning required when neither the problem nor its solution is clearly defined. *Learning* is the key term in adaptive work. Because there are no easy answers or singular solutions in adaptive work, achieving agreement on a course of action means first that participants must recognize that their existing perspectives won't lead them to a resolution, and second that they must suspend assumptions, entertain fresh questions, and try on the perspectives of others. They must realize that a solution isn't a matter of applying technical solutions more expertly, but rather one of framing problems differently. Thus, for Heifetz, the essence of leadership lies in creating space for important learning to occur.

This kind of thinking is evident in much of the writing on leadership in the early years of this century. A good example is Amanda Sinclair's book *Leadership for the Disillusioned: Moving Beyond Myths and Heroes to Leading that Liberates* (2007). Rejecting the notion that leadership is about controlling or changing people, she defines leadership as "a relationship in which leaders inspire or mobilize others to extend their capacity to imagine, think, and act in positive new ways" (p. xvi). Note the similarity here to Heifetz' definition of adaptive work. Sinclair is just one of many who have called for a shift in perspective about leadership: from hierarchical to lateral, from command-and-control

to participatory, from heroic to team-oriented, and from mechanistic to organic.

As a way to commemorate 25 years of publication, *The Leadership Quarterly* published an extensive review of leadership theory and research (Dinh, et al., 2014). The authors noted, tellingly, that “prior research indicates that we know much less about how leaders make organizations effective than how leaders are perceived” (p. 37). The results of their analysis bear this out: the dominant theories studied continue to be allied with transformational and strategic leadership. Other perspectives are, however, gaining ground, most visibly relational and team leadership, and complexity leadership, spurring the authors to suggest that “leadership researchers are beginning to appreciate the social context in which the leader operates ... and [this] is no longer the neglected side of leadership” (p. 41). Years after Rost (1993) wrote his prescient book, scholars are finally taking heed.

Even those who study “great leaders” are leaving the heroic model behind. Torres (2014), who has spent her career studying leaders around the world, has concluded that successful leaders need to ask themselves three questions if they want their organizations to thrive: “Where are you looking to anticipate change? What is the diversity of your personal and professional network? And, are you courageous enough to abandon the past?”

## Latest thinking on leadership in higher education

Those interested in a thorough treatment of leadership theory and research applied to higher education should read *Rethinking the ‘L’ Word in Higher Education*, a superb monograph by Adriana Kezar and her colleagues (2006). In their review, the authors note several key developments in research on leadership in higher education, and these largely mirror the general leadership literature. First, significantly more attention is now being paid to leadership outside lines of formal authority: a more *collective* approach. Second, research paradigms have broadened from a “functionalist” (read: behavioral) approach to a more social constructivist perspective: a more *context-dependent* approach. And third, ways in which successful leaders are depicted have shifted from powerful, “heroic” images to a focus on collaboration and power-sharing: a more *relational* approach. This is true even in community college settings, traditionally seen as bureaucratic organizations (Eddy, 2010).

Two emerging perspectives in particular stand out as relevant to the higher education leader: relational leadership and complexity leadership.

*Relational leadership* looks at what happens in everyday experience. Leaders obviously don’t work in a vacuum: they must be able to deal effectively in a network of organizational relationships. The effective leader therefore must be able to identify relationships among network elements and

understand how they work, consider how they use language in interactions with different parts of the network, and know that understandings are social constructions (Uhl-Bien, 2006). “A relational leader sees people not as objects to be manipulated but as human beings-in-relation with themselves” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 43). The challenge is to acknowledge one’s own experience of difference, so that in these “moments of difference” accepted views and practice are unsettled and new ways of seeing and working are opened up. Being a good relational leader is a lot more than having good communication skills: leading well requires a degree of openness to others’ perspectives and a personal reflexivity that is uncommon or even unknown in traditional leadership development programs.

This recent thinking on relational leadership bears some resemblance to a treasured artifact of the academy, the collegial ideal. The collegial culture, a hybrid of German and British traditions in higher education, views faculty members as highly autonomous professionals having a great distrust of formal authority and, therefore, leadership is something all faculty do, largely through the give-and-take of campus politics (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008). While certain vestigial elements of the classic collegium remain, such as faculty committees, little evidence of the collegial ideal exists on many campuses today, requiring other ways of thinking about collaboration. Kouzes and Posner, both high-profile leadership scholars, wrote *The Academic Administrator’s Guide to Exemplary Leadership* (2003), in which they extrapolated their research to higher education, recommending that academic leaders use collaborative models to engage their colleagues in creating a shared vision, empowering others to act, and generally encouraging broader participation in leadership roles. My own work on leadership effectiveness reflects a strong emphasis on collaboration as well. In the early 2000s, I led a national research effort sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts to identify key elements of a quality institutional climate (Wergin, 2003). We identified six; the most important of these, by far, was what we called “a leadership of engagement,” in which “leaders are able to frame issues clearly, put clear choices before the faculty, and be open to negotiation about what will inform these decisions” (p. 33). The second most important element was what we called “engaged departments,” campus units that “ask very basic questions about themselves: ‘what are we trying to do? Why are we trying to do it? Why are we doing it that way? How do we know it works?’” In essence, engaged leaders and engaged departments are successful at creating a climate for reflexivity, of the sort encouraged by relational leadership theory.

As Kezar and her colleagues (2006) document, collaborative leadership has been shown to have significant potential for improving decision making in colleges and universities “if properly developed and sustained” (p. 134, emphasis added). This is, unfortunately, a big if: individualistic faculty cultures and highly-siloed organizational structures are difficult to

break down. Hower (2012), in a study of faculty collaboration in academic departments in four diverse institutions, found little collaboration in teaching-related activities (except for curriculum committees), widely diverse levels of collaboration in scholarship, and almost no collaboration in campus service activities. The good news from Hower's study is that when asked to compare current with desired collaboration, most faculty wanted more rather than less, even though the reward structure strongly favored individual work.

*Complexity leadership* also focuses on networks and relationships, but in a distinctly different way. Both relational leadership and complexity leadership focus on lateral spheres of influence, the power of networks, and a worldview that trusts the emergent more than the preordained. The difference lies in perspective: in relational leadership, organizations are understood as communities of people and conversations; in complexity leadership, they are understood as structures and systems.

Complexity leadership has its intellectual home in chaos theory, popularized by Margaret Wheatley in her book *Leadership and the New Science* (1992). In contrast to bureaucratic models of organization, which assume that human behavior is rational and that change is linear and predictable, complexity theory holds that organisms, including organizational systems, are "complex adaptive systems" characterized by networks having rich patterns of interaction. These interaction patterns create a constant state of disequilibrium in the system, which leads to "nonlinear, emergent dynamics" (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, p. 293). As they point out, complexity theory completely upends traditional theories of leadership: "Complexity theorists would argue, for example, that the nonlinear collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s emerged from a complex interaction, over years, of (among other things) economic conditions, political pressures, international pressures, arms and space races, and the difficulties of managing diverse cultures, rather than from the actions of single hierarchical leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev" (p. 293). The obvious question is, what role is there for leaders in such unstable contexts? Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) proposed what they call "enabling leadership:" "leadership that structures and enables conditions such that complex adaptive systems are able to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning" (p. 299). Enabling leadership, then, keeps these complex systems healthy by fostering interaction and interdependency, while also injecting tension (such as information about the organizational environment) sufficient to keep the energy going.

Complexity theory is highly abstract and until recently has not generated much empirical research. In one promising study, Dickens (2013) used a mixed-method design to study factors associated with enabling leadership in a major medical center. He found seven factors that facilitate emergent change:

- Executive engagement: "The degree to which senior management demonstrates support for, and commitment to non-hierarchical approaches"
- Safe-fail culture: "The degree to which the organization is perceived to be one that is innovative and is comfortable to make mistakes, learn, and move on without fear of recrimination"
- Collaborative decision processes: "The degree to which people throughout the organization have timely input into the decisions that affect the work that they do"
- Collaborative quality: "The degree to which decisions about quality measures and strategies are defined by the people doing the work, supported with the data they need to make decisions"
- Intentional learning processes: "The degree to which there is both formal and informal support for both technical and relational skills and the willingness of the organization to learn as it goes"
- Culture of experimentation: "The degree to which people are willing to try new ideas and approaches, to listen to people who think differently than they do, and to welcome innovation"
- Purposeful orientation: "The degree to which people feel they have a common purpose and focus and share a passion for that purpose" (pp. 118-119)

Even though Dickens' study took place in a health care setting, parallels to higher education are easy to draw. Complexity theory fits many of the qualities long associated with higher education cultures. Cohen and March's work (1974) has become iconic for its description of academic cultures as not just complex systems but "organized anarchies." Weick's work, also from the 70s (updated, 2001), depicted colleges and universities as "loosely coupled" organizations with decentralized authority and unpredictable communication patterns. And Birnbaum's classic book on the college presidency (1992) warned leaders bent on "transforming" their campuses that their efforts would likely meet with stiff resistance, and that they would be far better off paying attention to the campus culture and supporting adaptive change.

These emerging ideas on relational and complexity leadership are welcome developments. But the higher education leader drawn to the new models is also pulled in the opposite direction, toward greater managerial expertise and, yes, *administrative* leadership. College costs spiraling out of control have led to calls for accountability that seem ever more strident. As long as higher education is seen as serving a key role in economic mobility and access, it must be able to demonstrate its contributions to the public good: "To whom is higher education responsible, for what purposes, for whose benefit, by which means, and with what consequences?" (Burke & Associates, 2005, p. x). As long as the higher education community appears unwilling to do this, accountability measures will be mandated from the outside. The federal government, saddled with huge unpaid

student debt, is intruding ever more forcefully into campus policy, requiring an entire administrative lattice just to feed the bureaucracy. Thus two contrary movements are taking place at once: more lateral and participatory decision making as described above *and* a growing “managerial culture” (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008), even a “corporate university” (Levine, 2000)! Economic and political forces for greater social accountability have forced colleges and universities to create more bureaucratic governance structures, which serve to distance academic professionals from key decision-making roles (cf. Hebel, 2014). Academic leaders are faced with challenges that are unique to the higher education sector. How are they to resolve them?

First, effective academic leadership requires balancing lateral leadership with administrative leadership: getting things done while also paying attention to relationships; focusing on the emergent while also keeping an eye on how small changes turn into big ones; and negotiating organizational vision from both top-down and grass-roots perspectives (for more on the latter, see Kezar’s article on grassroots leadership, 2012).

Second, effective academic leadership focuses on learning at all levels. Effective leaders, knowing that the future is not

only unpredictable but nonlinear and non-rational as well, use multiple cognitive lenses, listen carefully to diverse perspectives and encourage others to do the same, develop cultures of reflection in their academic units, and understand that a major function of leadership is to help shape meaning-making. They are able to discriminate between technical and adaptive work, and do not let the former supplant the latter.

And third, modern academic leaders recognize and take advantage of the power of networks. They realize that the most important interactions, and prospects for healthy organizational change, take place in ways that have very little to do with formal organizational charts.

I’ll close this essay with a note on the importance of *praxis* in leadership. Praxis has been defined many ways, but my favorite definition is by the great emancipatory educator Paulo Freire, who wrote that praxis is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 33). It’s hard to imagine any successful leader today who has not developed and nurtured a daily, almost subconscious reflection on practice. How else could one possibly deal with the challenges listed above?

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*Research (1996, 2001, 2005, and 2010, with J. McMillan); Departmental Assessment: How Some Campuses are Effectively Evaluating the Collective Work of Faculty (AAHE: 2000, with J. N. Swingen); and Departments That Work: Creating and Sustaining Cultures of Excellence in Academic Departments (Anker, 2003). He has also published numerous journal articles on such topics as professional education, assessment, and the restructuring of faculty work. Dr. Wergin is also a member of IDEA’s Board of Directors.*

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## Notes

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