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## Developing Leadership Skills

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [Developing Leadership Skills](#)

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### Autobiographical Note

Dr. Gerald Gaither, a former Senior Fulbright Professor of Planning and Management, is Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Analysis at the Prairie View campus of the Texas A&M University System. He is also a participant in the Kellog Leadership Project under the direction of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service

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### Abstract

An analysis of current leadership theory is presented, along with a summary of the major literature findings. Emphasis is placed on providing ideas which have practical as opposed to theoretical application. A sub-theme in the article is that leadership skills can be learned or taught, and the manuscript challenges institutions to implement leadership development programs, such as the Kellog Leadership Project.

## Developing Leadership Skills

In

Academia

By

Gerald H. Gaither

Reports On Leadership

?Written reports [on leadership] only have purpose if read by the king.?

Wess Roberts,

Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun [1, p. 101]

Leadership

?The best of all leaders is the one who helps people so that, eventually, they don't need him. Then comes the one they love and admire. Then comes the one they fear. The worst is the one who lets people push him around. Where there is no trust, people will act in bad faith. The best leader doesn't say much, but what he says carries weight. When he is finished with his work, the people say, ?It happened naturally.?"

–Lao Tzu [2, p. X]

Observations On Leadership

“In fact, if I had to choose one quality to distinguish the best new leaders, it is openness to criticism, the passion for continued self development, which teaches the leader to value the development of others.”

Michael Maccoby,

The Leader [3,P. XVI]

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“The institutional leader is primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values.”

Phillip Selznick,

Leadership in Administration [4,P. 28]

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“To develop one’s own philosophy and vision, and to elevate what Martin Luther King called, ‘the drum major instinct,’ the would-be leader can benefit from an education in history, biography, the philosophy of ethics (Heraclitus, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Kierkegaard); literature that probes character (Sophocles, Shakespeare, Tolstoi, Ibsen); and analytic psychology (Freud, James, Fromm, Erik Erikson). Those who do not encounter helpful teachers in school and college must study these books by themselves or form groups like some of the managers and workers in Bolivar who read the Bible and the Great Books together. (It is significant that a number of workers requested a course in public speaking.) These books must be read critically in relation to our times and social character. They should be discussed and interpreted in relation to one’s own experiences and popular culture shown in movies and TV programs.”

Michael Maccoby,

The Leader [5, P. 236]

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“Learning is the essential fuel for the leader, the source of high octane energy that keeps up the momentum by continually sparking new understanding, new ideas, and new challenges. It is absolutely indispensable under today’s conditions of rapid change and complexity. Very simply, those who do not learn do not long survive as leaders.?”

Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus,

Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge [6,p. 188]

“Leaders are not made by corporate courses, any more than they are made by their college courses, but by experience. Therefore, it is not devices, such as ‘career path planning,’ or training courses, that are needed, but an organization’s commitment to providing its potential leaders with opportunities to learn through experience in an environment that permits growth and change.?”

Warren Bennis,

On Becoming a Leader [7, p. 182]

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“Leadership is the privilege to have the responsibility to direct the actions of others in carrying out the purposes of the organization, at varying levels of authority and with accountability

for both successful and failed endeavors. It does not constitute a model or system. No model or system of leadership behavior can anticipate the circumstances, conditions and situations in which the leader must influence the actions of others. An evaluation of leadership principles is an effective base upon which to build other skills that may be important to success in 'specialized fields.'”

Wess Roberts,

Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun [8, p. XIV]

Introduction

Leadership!

Everybody wants to have it, yet few people, including the experts, can even define it precisely. A leading expert on the topic, Warren Bennis, recently observed, “To an extent, leadership is like beauty: it’s hard to define, but you know it when you see it “[9, p.1]. Presidents John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan had it, but Presidents Warren G. Harding and Jimmy Carter did not. Almost everyone agrees there is less of it than there used to be, and that we are in desperate need of more and better leadership. Like the whooping crane, it appears to be an endangered species!

As I read through the current literature on leadership, particularly university leadership, it is difficult to avoid the indictments of higher education’s leaders. Consider the following cogent comment in George Keller’s

Academic Strategy.

Except among rare individuals, presidents in American higher education tend to avoid management and leadership like a poison ivy petal [10, p. 172).

But the pressures faced in a single day by many university presidents, supported mostly by anecdotal evidence, suggest a turbulent, pressurized, volatile environment that would, without a strong individual will, suffocate and reduce even the most resolute of academic leaders to inaction. Peter Flawn, former president of the University of Texas at Austin (1979-1985), indicated that leading a major public university "may be the hardest job in the world." On a day-to-day basis, "you have to put up with 'jackass' regents, win-at-all-cost football coaches, and [a] fickle faculty” who “complains of weak leadership? but “does not want to be led” — all the while, managing an institution which may have an annual operating budget in excess of \$500 million [11]. Clearly, anyone who does not

effectively shape and influence the actions of others in such a hostile environment will soon be mastered by it.

In today's climate of balancing competing constituency interests, financial contraction, growing student populations, and abundant public criticism, it seems clear that the higher education community needs to hone and apply its skills to better meet the strident leadership demands of our time. It is the purpose of this paper to build upon previously learned precepts of leadership and provide practical guidance to assist interested individuals with this process.

## Leadership Theory

Through the years the various theories of leadership have changed, yet ironically have remained much the same, with moral overtones being added to the modern studies. Historians and political scientists have long embraced the "great man theory" of leadership, believing that leaders are born with "the right stuff", not made, and summoned to a calling. In contrast, another longstanding theory is that great events make leaders of otherwise ordinary people. Did the Civil War, for example, "make" President Abraham Lincoln a great leader, or was his greatness a matter of both and he was summoned to his calling by events?

More recent theories of leadership revolve around the idea of "good" leaders versus "bad" leaders. James McGregor Burns, a noted Pulitzer Prize winning political scientist is one of the most famous proponents of this theory [12]. To illustrate, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Franklin Roosevelt were all leaders who had the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it. The difference was in the wise use of power and leadership for positive results, which resulted in the betterment of an organization or a country. The wise use of their power (e.g., Franklin Roosevelt) is what Burns called "transformative leadership," a label which permeates almost all of the current scholarly studies of leadership [13, 14]. To understand this view, these theorists observe the way in which

power

has been used — or misused. The junk bond czar, Michael Milken, for example, by his business acumen, energy and his intellect, may transform the current basic financial underpinnings of the country, be recognized as a modern business guru, yet not be regarded as "leading." To paraphrase Peter Drucker, managers are people who do things right, but leaders are people who do the right thing ("transformative leadership") [15]. President Clinton's current dilemma has again raised the question of whether character and the use (or abuse) of power are

necessary ingredients for a leader to be a "good" leader.

A fine distinction should be noted here between power, management, and leadership. A manager and a leader may both possess power but further distinctions are clear:

1.

Management is more of a skill, which can be taught with varying degrees of success ? it performs more of a maintenance function.

2.

Leadership is more of a style, which is vision and action oriented ? it is more than management

The good manager, for example, may focus on the bottom line while the leader focuses on the horizon. The leader seeks the questions while the manager seeks the answers. An individual can be a good manager and yet not be an effective leader; but it seems very unlikely that an individual can be a good leader without also being a good manager.

The good news is, modern experts believe that both management and leadership are processes

which can be taught, with varying degrees of success, to anyone.

Consider the observation of Warren Bennis who believes "each of us contains the capacity for leadership."

Although I have said that everyone has the capacity for leadership, I do not believe that everyone will become a leader.... Too many people are mere products of their context, lacking the will to change, to develop their potential. I also believe, however, that anyone of any age and in any circumstances, can transform himself if he wants it. Becoming the kind of person who is a leader is the ultimate act of free will, and if you have the will, there is the way [16, p.8].

Thus Bennis, like many modern experts on leadership, believes "it" can be taught to everyone, with varying degrees of success, and if an individual will apply himself (transforming self as well as surroundings), he can become a leader. Thus, current leadership theory suggests that leaders are not necessarily born, they can be made; it is not events but individual will that more often makes a leader. A leader will transform himself and his vision into a positive reality which is concerned with influence, guiding a course of action or opinions. People with such leadership ability often will have an abundance of energy, a large part of which can be transferred to others. Their vision and manner can be hypnotic, and they relate

intimately to people as individuals, even when these individuals make up a crowd.

## What Is Leadership?

Educational organizations are discovering that to truly execute people-focused quality and excellence, they must rely on the personal leadership of individuals at every level in the organization's structure. And as the conditions of academia tend toward permanent flux, universities also are finding that the leadership they need now goes beyond traditional models. The call is for a new, more flexible understanding of what leadership means.

Over the past 20 years, as noted above, a number of scholars and organizations devoted to the study of leadership have conducted extensive on-going research on the specific practices that distinguish high performing leaders. What characterizes effective leaders who are bringing a quality mentality, a "search for excellence", throughout their organizations? While most of the more rigorous research has been conducted on the corporate sector, there seems little reason to believe that these findings are not also transferable to the nonprofit sector [17].

The need for a fundamentally new view of academic leadership can be traced to four sources: 1) changing organizational structures, e.g., modern multi-campus systems; 2) more participation, a "flatter" organization; 3) a new, more diverse work force with rising expectations, diminished institutional (and more discipline) loyalties, and less reverence for administrative authority; and 4) the quality movement itself, which started in corporate Japan, but has spread world-wide to profit and non-profit organizations alike. Long before quality and a people focus became buzzwords in the West, the Japanese had concluded that innovation, the power and authority to make decisions, and the ability to mobilize others must exist throughout the ranks of an organization. They reasoned that, in a complex environment, those closest to the processes are best suited to make decisions and see them through. Such a philosophy was easily adopted to the university and educational environment which was far less hierarchical than the traditional corporate structure.

Here is a digest of some of the major findings on leadership:

1. Without leadership, organizations falter in times of change or turmoil. The changes that occur in the process of implementing efforts in a people-oriented organization such as a university often make people feel tentative, vulnerable, and reluctant to act. It is precisely when the world starts



crumbling, however, that effective administrative leadership is essential to a university's or system's success. Strong leaders see clearly and act decisively in an environment of turmoil, preferably before the turmoil begins.

2. As educational organizations have become more people and community-focused, an institution's progress and leadership ultimately depend on the personal interactions and leadership skills throughout the system or university. The challenge of becoming a nationally recognized institution, or system, for example, is simply too complex for a single "heroic" individual, at either the system or campus level, to master.

3. Positions and titles often bear no relationship to leadership performance. Many people tend to connect leadership with appointed formal authority, to confuse ultimate position with ultimate wisdom and leadership. Current research links leadership with behavior, not merely position.

4. Academic leadership, in particular, involves interdependence more than individualism. Most people intuitively buy into the "great man" theory discussed earlier – the leader as a daring but isolated achiever. Current research has found that leadership, particularly in people-oriented organizations such as a university, has less to do with individualism than with the ability to build and maintain relationships across, say, a system or an institution.

5. Leaders inspire (and allow) others to take on the tasks of leadership. A leader is not just someone who can win followers. A leader shows them that they can lead by giving them power, authority and support to do so. The ultimate goal is to enable every member of the team to take part in developing a new people-oriented direction, and to understand his or her role in leading others to achieve it.

6. Like planning, leadership is contextual. What works in one university or system may not work in another. Imitation, therefore, is not always flattering. Effective leadership is grounded in an extensive knowledge of the university (or system's) environment; an intimate understanding of the system, university and groups of people involved; a strong sense of the organization's strategy, culture, and values; and an on-going strong connection to the internal and external community and constituencies.

7. At the risk of repetition, it should be said again: current research findings conclude

that leadership can be learned and taught! The ability to lead is not just a question solely of inherent talent or experience. Effective leadership is learnable, but as Warren Bennis noted above, not everyone will become a leader.

8. Although leadership is certainly part stylistic, it is not only style, it is action. Popular mythology has often treated leadership as solely a matter of style and charisma. The current emphases on dressing for power, gamesmanship, and being savvy have resulted in a spate of books on successfully functioning in large organizations. Such books tend to focus on power symbols and status as essentials to being a successful leader. In his book

Power, for example, Michael Korda offers such observations and sage advice as: "Powerful people generally wear simple shoes" [18]. The New Age movement, with its emphases on mass consumption, enjoying life, and acquisition have tended to place an emphasis on style as the major strand in successful leadership [19]. However, current research indicates that the roots of effective leadership are more practical: successful leadership is based upon a set of observable behaviors, with more substance than style.

9. Finally, while management skills are not synonymous with leadership, administrative/management skills are an essential component of leadership. Current research indicates that to ensure continuous improvements, successful universities must foster leadership and management skills within each individual — leadership to build new values and create breakthroughs in times of turbulence, and strong management skills to maintain a university or system in times of stability.

### Leadership Strategies In Action

Perhaps the most wonderful news emerging from the current research on the topic is that you can develop and teach leadership. How can we benefit from our knowledge of leadership theory? What steps should be undertaken?

1.  
Develop A Set Of Criteria For Leadership And Developing Leadership Potential.

The American Council on Education has for years operated a successful administrative fellows program which is built around the

idea of identifying leadership potential, using certain observable criteria [20]. The Texas A&M University System has also developed an intern/fellows program. If such criteria can be defined and such individuals with considerable leadership potential developed, then a successful program for such an effort is clearly possible to develop.

2.

After Defining Leadership Qualities, Provide Opportunities For Leadership Development Of Selected Persons.

Experience and observation appear to be the best teachers of leadership. Experience can be provided through at least two avenues. First, an internship program which exposes the neophyte to the leader, allowing for observation, appears to be a very credible process. Again, the American Council on Education's program utilizes the experiential facet combined with learning.

An important corollary to leadership observation is, ostensibly, travel. According to an old adage, "suffering provides depth, and travel provides breadth. If you have a choice in life, take breadth!" Currently, a plethora of books discuss Japanese management methods but few, if any, discuss their exemplary leadership development in their modern corporations [21]. Educational systems, such as The Texas A&M University System, The University of California, and The State University of New York systems with international locations such as Europe, Japan and India have prime opportunities to provide travel experiences to their students, faculty, and administrators. Also, the increasing emphases on internationalism by educators would appear to encourage personal growth and leadership opportunities through reciprocal agreements with foreign organizations and universities; such exchanges with domestic institutions and within a system or educational organizations should not be overlooked.

3.

Modern Theorists Believe Leadership Can Be Taught To Anyone.

However, the elements of leadership must first be refined and taught to the instructors. Organizations such as the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, with worldwide locations, have proved quite successful with both profit and non-profit organizations in teaching to the converted[22]. Further, leadership development is a continuous learning process, so the need is there to provide a nurturing environment to allow persons to grow and develop, to provide incentives and opportunities for continuous growth.

Michael Maccoby has indicated that the type of education one chooses, or is provided, can also elevate leadership potential. For example, an education in history, biography, the philosophy of ethics, and analytical psychology help develop one's own philosophy and vision – characteristics generally regarded as basic to developing good leadership skills [23]. Does this suggest that a humanities oriented curriculum, such as that at Oxford and Cambridge University, offers a superior foundation for leadership, and that elements of such a program infused into an individual's program of study could enhance leadership skills? Finally, the opportunity to practice leadership must be provided above all else, or else observation and study without practice become meaningless expediency. The management gurus, Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, emphasize "the right to fail" in developing modern managers and leaders. [24]

Educational leaders can draw a number of lessons from the above materials. Not the least is that the task of developing leadership skills will first require a leader with a forum to communicate the overarching goals, the vision, and create the understanding, participation, and ownership of the vision among the followers and leaders in the organization.

## Conclusion

As observed at the outset of this article, university presidents often despair of providing or developing leadership for an institution, of successfully balancing competing constituency interests against each other and yet providing effective direction and vision to an organization [25, p. 172]. Too often, it has been cynically concluded that the modern university is not being led but "muddling through", using a pattern of "organized anarchy", of being incapable of being managed or led [6, 17]. However, recent leadership studies have concluded on a more positive note that "the creative input of a single individual, though small, may lead to far-reaching effects if guided by vision" [28, p.2;29]. The approach to leadership, discussed here, further concludes that focused creativity rather than anarchy can be consciously introduced, taught, and cultivated in a manner that supports continuous institutional and individual discovery and renewal through a never-ending cycle of leadership development. Even though each organization has its own mix of problems, the approach presented here can serve as a blueprint for improving leadership development on any campus or agency.

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