

Chapter 24

Closing the Leadership Gaps Between Theory and Practice: A Glimpse of the Major Leadership Issues in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to illustrate that there exist gaps between leadership theory and practice. Well-reasoned theories run through the pages of books; they are hardly applied to practice. In higher education, these gaps seem to be compounded by the lack of technical skills or leadership ethics. To demonstrate the true gaps between leadership theories and practice, the author provides a real example. While the different leadership theories are briefly reviewed, the author's intention was to show that they need to be applied to practice in order for leaders to guide followers in the right direction. Closing the gaps between leadership theories and practice may take many years and much effort. By reading this article, the readers/researchers will discern clearly the gaps that exist in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Read any job description for an administrative (leadership) position at an institution of higher learning, and the following characteristics are probably listed:

1. We are looking for leaders who are visionary and must take the university or program to a new height.
2. We are looking for leaders who are committed to shared governance.
3. We are looking for leaders who possess conceptual, human, and technical skills.
4. We are looking for leaders who have an excellent record of teaching, scholarship and service.
5. We are looking for leaders who are committed to doing the right things and doing things right.

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The list may go on and on. In addition to searching for leaders who possess leadership skills, institutions of higher learning are particularly interested in those individuals who have skills in teaching, research, and service. This is understandable because according to Taylor's principles of scientific management (as cited in Wang, 2011, p. 15), leaders, whether they are hired as department chairs, college deans, university provosts, or presidents, first of all, must know the field. In order to know the field, these "would be" leaders must have practiced in a certain field for quite a few years before they can be "labeled" as experts. Without being experts, these leaders will not be in a position to carry out Taylor's principles of scientific management. Principles of scientific management are useful and helpful to leaders as leaders are looking for the one best method to lead followers. Leaders want followers to be highly productive in a certain field. As stated in the principles of scientific management (Taylor, 1911, p. 9), leaders, like managers, should focus on that one best method in their followers.

Then, the question comes to mind, "How can leaders look for the one best method?" Institutions of higher learning have set the standards. In other words, leaders must be excellent in their teaching, research, and professional service. Without modeling the teaching, research and scholarship expectations for their followers, there is no way leaders can evaluate followers' performance and find the one best method (based on principles of scientific management; of course leaders may use multiple methods) to help followers to be productive in the field. Common sense tells us, "The more leaders know their followers, the better they can help followers identify that one best method to be productive in the field." Thousands of years ago, in order to pass a certain trade, fathers had to be experts in a certain field first (Roberts, 1965; Wang & King, 2008; Wang & King, 2009). Otherwise, children could not learn a trade from their fathers.

Even to this day, leaders are still learning to be leaders by "trial and error" although there are all

kinds of leadership training academies. Leaders in higher education are not born to be leaders. And they usually do not have a degree in leadership, just a degree in their content field. Most of them first work as faculty members. After a certain number of years, they become excellent faculty members in teaching and scholarship. Then these faculty members look for leadership positions. Some are chosen based on their excellent teaching and scholarship, plus they may possess the traits of effective leaders.

Others are chosen because of their connections with leaders, or based on their seniority, irrespective of their former teaching, research or desired leadership skills. In higher education, these installed leaders are labeled as "puppet" administrators, which means they will do anything if their superiors tell them what to do. These administrators are called "team players" by their supervisors, and they are being actively promoted according to their ranks. Those who oppose to their wrong doings are labeled as "loose cannons", therefore, must be removed from institutions of higher learning. It is not rare that highly qualified professors, even tenured professors are laid off from university settings. Those team players together with the help of their supervisors can remove anyone they consider a potential threat to their "leadership." In fact, there is even literature about the aforementioned fact of removing qualified faculty from universities. In the literature, it is called "academic mobbing" (Friedenberg, 2006). Certain leaders with the power invested in them may choose to gang up on others who oppose their wrong doings. It is not pleasant to use the term, "gang up on", but this is the reality in many university settings. It is this "ganging up on" people that has intensified the so termed "leadership gap" in higher education.

Numerous books and articles have been written on leadership. However, very few articles touch on closing this leadership gap between theory and practice. On the one hand, there are beautifully well-reasoned theories on leadership.

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