Identifying and Nurturing Potential Academic Leaders

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In higher education, the academic leadership pipeline has historically flowed from a department chair rotational system, with little or no succession planning. Until recently, senior faculty willing to do their share of administrative work simply took a turn as department chair and then returned (relieved and often disillusioned) to their tenured professorial role. Today, increasing numbers are unwilling to take their turn, and too few are eager to volunteer for administrative roles. Why is this so often the case? Smith (1996) believes that “a person who doesn’t feel the thrill of challenge is not a potential leader” (p. 30). I think academic leadership avoidance is more complex than that. The role conflicts involved in balancing creativity and autonomy with bureaucracy (Davenport, 2001) likely contribute to the reticence to assume academic leadership roles. In addition, considering the pittance that department chairs receive for their work, one wonders why anyone would aspire to that role. Fortunately, other incentives do exist, such as the intrinsic reward of service to the department or the potential for the role to be the entry point for a future deanship or vice presidency. Even so, Davenport (2001) notes, “For many, the power, prestige and increased income that often accompany managerial roles are not worth the trade-offs” (p. 57).

With a move away from rotational chairs and a reluctance to tackle the conflicting responsibilities inherent in the lower levels of academic leadership, how can those at the top of the pipeline identify faculty who have the ability and desire to move through the ranks? What characteristics will increase the probability of willingness, commitment, and perseverance?
How does one find those who have the integrity, values, and fortitude needed for making the right decisions for the right reasons? Once identified, how can potential academic leaders be nurtured and encouraged and developed? What experiences would be helpful to budding academic administrators? These are the questions this chapter examines.

**Characteristics of Effective Academic Leaders**

Identifying the characteristics of leadership takes only a limited effort, since the literature is replete with discussion of the attributes of successful leaders (Allen, 1980; Autry, 1991; Bennis, 1989a; Byham, 1982; Conger and Benjamin, 1999; Goleman, 1998; Hayes, 1980; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Maccoby, 1981; McCauley, Moxley, and Velsor, 1998; Sonnenberg, 1993). At the top of the list in most studies is honesty (Kouzes and Posner, 1990). Followers want leaders they believe will be truthful, forthright, and trustworthy in their dealings with employees (Bennis, 1989b; Lee and King, 2001; Sonnenberg, 1993). Other commonly cited characteristics are integrity, credibility, fairness, high energy level, and perseverance (Byham, 1982; Bennis, 1989a, 1989b; Geneen, 1984; Kouzes and Posner, 1989; Kroo, 1977; Peters, 1987). Effective leaders demonstrate a strong goal orientation (Waitley, 1983), willingness to take risks (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Whitney and Packer, 2002), good communication skills (McConkey, 1989; Waitley, 1983), and objective decision making (McConkey, 1989; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Ryan and Oestreich, 1991). They have the ability to adapt (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Waitley, 1983) and a desire to serve (Geneen, 1984). Many possess humility, some are creative, most are open; virtually all are dedicated and committed to the importance of what they are doing (Bennis, 1989a, 1989b; McConkey, 1989). The best ones have the capacity to tolerate the idiosyncrasies and weaknesses of others (Ryan and Oestreich, 1991).

Noticeably missing from this list is intelligence. Although some might argue that a high level of intelligence is essential for leaders, I purport that other competencies are more crucial. However, a leader does need enough intelligence to make decisions based on rational and objective reasoning. Reasoning and reflection, nevertheless, do not require the ability to do quantum physics.

In their efforts to identify how leadership affects not only the progress but also the development and survival or organizations, Bennis and Nanus (1985) interviewed ninety leaders, including sixty successful CEOs and thirty public sector heads. They concluded, “Leadership is like the Abominable Snowman, whose footprints are everywhere but who is nowhere to be seen” (p. 20). While recognizing that numerous common traits exist, Bennis and Nanus (1985) were nonplussed when they found very successful leaders who did not demonstrate all or even most of the identified characteristics. “They were right-brained and left-brained, tall and short, fat
and thin, articulate and inarticulate, assertive and retiring, dressed for success and dressed for failure, participative and autocratic" (pp. 25–26). Despite the many commonly shared attributes, the researchers concluded, "There were more variations than themes. Even their managerial styles were restlessly different" (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p. 26). For the authors, who were "interested in patterns, in underlying themes," the leaders interviewed were "frustratingly unruly" (p. 26).

Not to be deterred, Bennis and Nanus (1985) "vigorously trolled these disparate powers for uniformities," looking for "kernels of truth about leadership—the marrow, if you will, of leadership behavior" (p. 26). What they found were four distinctly different strategies or competencies (pp. 26–27):

- "Attention through vision"—creating a focus or agenda based on a vision of the future
- "Meaning through communication"—with or without words, the ability to get people to adopt shared values and common goals
- "Trust through positioning"—consistency in accountability, predictability, and reliability of the mission or vision
- "The deployment of self through positive self-regard"—recognizing strengths and compensating for weaknesses; nurturing of skills with discipline

Respecting the research and conclusions of Bennis and Nanus (1985), those searching for potential academic leaders might find examples of intuitive identification as instructive as formal investigation of leadership characteristics or competencies. Harold Geneen, who served for seventeen years as the head of International Telephone and Telegraph Company, was a master at zeroing in on individuals with leadership potential. He himself was noted for his high energy level, natural enthusiasm, and quick mind. He liked his work, he worked hard, and he set a clear example for those who worked with him (Moscow, 1984). Undoubtedly, these traits would be a good place to start in looking for academic leaders. Geneen was quick to note that he did not want geniuses who were so intelligent they could not work with others. Instead, what he looked for were people who were capable, experienced, and motivated—people who wanted to make something of themselves and were not afraid to work hard for what they wanted. In short, he wanted people who shared his enthusiasm for work (Geneen, 1984).

While accepting the attributes discussed in the preceding paragraphs as desirable and even necessary, my experience indicates the most critical factor to look for in aspiring academic leaders is fortitude: the will to make the right decisions for the right reasons. Unfortunately, some faculty who move into leadership roles are unable to make the right (and often tough) decisions because they are too tied to their faculty colleagues and to commonly revered privileges of the academy. For example, the role of an academic
department chair requires a faculty member to balance a tightly held commitment to faculty freedom and loyalties with the need to hold a broader view of the university, its budgetary constraints, and its obligations to the whole. Many faculty cannot distance themselves enough from their faculty myopia to see the big picture and to make decisions that serve the university rather than just the faculty. As a faculty member moves through the academic pipeline, the distancing becomes increasingly critical.

Caution must be exercised in avoiding the Peter Principle. Faculty members who are capable, experienced, and motivated in the classroom do not necessarily make capable (or even happy) administrators. Bennis (1989b), himself a former university president, postulates that experience at one level may well instill “certain principles and guidelines to action that were antithetical to the pneumatic beat” (p. 9) of new situations and crises an academic administrator may face in moving up the hierarchy. Although he was describing the movement of a dean to a president, the principle is applicable at all levels, and it reinforces the idea that a willingness to accept and embrace change may be the highest attribute for successful administrators.

Avoiding the Wrong Selection of Academic Leaders

Knowing what to avoid is just as important, if not more so, than knowing what to look for in potential leaders. A word of caution: just because someone wants to be a department chair or dean does not mean he or she will be effective in a leadership role. Nor does the best teacher necessarily make the best academic leader any more than the best violinist automatically makes the best conductor (Smith, 1996). An Industry Week article (Verespej, 1990) and a story of paradox (Harvey, 1988) provide clues that can be adapted to the academic environment to suggest those who should be avoided in the selection of academic leaders:

- Faculty who cannot move from colleague to leader (Maccoby, 1981)
- Faculty who manage by agreement. This could also be described as the “Abilene Paradox,” a simple yet complex principle illustrated by the story of a family who takes a fifty-three-mile trip to Abilene, Texas, on a 104 degree day in an un-air-conditioned 1958 Buick on dusty dirt roads—despite the fact that none of them really wants to go. How could such a thing happen? It is rather simple: each thought the others wanted to go and thus refrained from saying what he or she really thought. It was only some four hours and 106 miles later that they admitted to one another (rather angrily) that they had all done just the opposite of what they had wanted to do. Watergate was another prime example of a group going down a road to an undesirable destination not because they wholeheartedly agreed on the mission but because they failed to express their reservations (Harvey, 1988).
• Faculty who are insensitive, aloof, or inflexible (Maccoby, 1981)
• Faculty who are unable to handle a crisis or performance problem (Maccoby, 1981)
• Faculty who fail to understand the internal and external environment (Maccoby, 1981)
• Faculty who do not know how to handle power (Maccoby, 1981)

This last flaw can be fatal for an academic administrator. Academic administrators at all levels (including presidents) must recognize they have only limited power regardless of their titles. In fact, the only true authority resides in the power of policy and the power of persuasion. Shared governance, combined with a litigious society that challenges most forms of authority and decision making, severely limits an administrator’s effectiveness if it is not based on policy or persuasion. Collaboration, consistency in openness and full disclosure, and the ability to communicate a shared vision form the only legitimate basis of power in the academy. As in the military, titles do not guarantee real power, which is little more than the capacity to influence and inspire (Powell, 2001).

One last word of caution: recognize the value in a "constructive spirit of discontent" (Smith, 1996, p. 30). Smith differentiates between being critical and being constructively discontent:

If somebody says, “There’s got to be a better way to do this,” I see if there’s leadership potential by asking, “Have you ever thought about what that better way might be?” If he says no, he is being critical, not constructively. But if he says yes, he’s challenged by a constructive spirit of discontent. That’s the unscratchable itch. It is always in the leader [p. 30].

The Testing Ground: Finding Potential Academic Leaders

Thus far I have discussed the common characteristics of successful leaders and some attributes to avoid in the quest for potential leaders. Knowing what we want in leaders and what we do not want, how do we find those who have the potential and will to serve in academic administrative roles?

McCauley, Moxley, and Velsor (1998) identify assessment as step one of the leadership identification and development process. Reporting on the success of the Center for Creative Leadership, they suggest two methods: 360-degree feedback and the feedback-intensive program. Both enhance self-awareness and describe an individual’s leadership skills and behaviors. The feedback-intensive program goes a step further, helping the person understand his or her needs, preferences, and values. These types of formal assessment are likely very helpful, but many institutions may lack the time or resources to use such tools. In the absence of such formal assessments, the search for potential academic leaders must take more intuitive (Geneen’s method) or experience-based approaches.
Ohlott (1998) discusses the importance of developmental job assignments in identifying those who have the potential to move beyond the faculty role. These job assignments can be responsibilities added to an existing job (such as working on a short-term project or coordinating mentors), a piece of a job (such as dealing with a difficult employee or compiling information to use in schedule assignments), or an entire job (such as redesigning a system). In the academic world, it might also be chairing an accreditation self-study or taking a leadership role in developing an online program. For an extended test of leadership capability and performance, interim administrative assignments for up to a year serve as a fertile ground for testing and developing leaders.

A job assignment takes on a developmental role when it stretches people, pushes them out of their comfort zones, and requires them to think and act differently. It may involve roles that are not well defined, and it usually contains some elements that are new to the person. These assignments place people in a challenging situation full of problems to solve, dilemmas to resolve, obstacles to overcome, and choices to make under conditions of risk and uncertainty [Ohlott, 1998, p. 130].

The new assignments provide an opportunity to assess strengths or deficiencies, creativity, and tolerance for ambiguity. They can also be a test of decision making, conflict resolution, and interpersonal skills.

Developmental experiences are testing grounds for seeing how aspiring or potential academic administrators react to responsibilities that require them to juggle faculty desires and needs, student needs, and administration mandates. Balancing competing needs inevitably results in criticism from those who perceive their needs have been given insufficient weight or influence. Decision making for the good of the whole over the desire or need of one individual or group is a requisite yet difficult leadership action. Colin Powell (2001) provides some applicable and discerning lessons in his leadership primer:

Good leadership involves responsibility to the welfare of the group, which means that some people will get angry at your actions and decisions. It's inevitable, if you're honorable. Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity: you'll avoid the tough decisions, you'll avoid confronting the people who need to be confronted, and you'll avoid offering differential rewards based on differential performance because some people might get upset. Ironically, by procrastinating on the difficult choices, by trying not to get anyone mad, and by treating everyone equally 'nicely' regardless of their contributions, you'll simply ensure that the only people you'll wind up angering are the most creative and productive people in the organization [slide 2].

Putting aspiring administrators in positions where they must demonstrate their willingness to make decisions is thus a good testing ground.
Within the developmental experiences and job assignments discussed above, specific practice or familiarity in the following areas would be beneficial to future academic leaders:

- Budget analysis and development (this could be project based, such as in grant development)
- Program development (current department chairs or deans could assign primary responsibility for new academic programs or curriculum revision to potential leaders)
- Schedule analysis or work-load review
- Policy analysis or development (such as providing leadership to review existing posttenure review policies)
- Internal coordination of externally based initiatives (such as chairing an internal United Way campaign)
- External representation of the university on special committees or boards (such as the chamber of commerce)
- Opportunity to visit or benchmark other institutions as the basis for planning changes within the department
- Skill-based training in areas such as budgeting, curriculum development, or assessment (this could be individual or group based)

**Nurturing New Academic Leaders**

Supporting potential academic leaders as they face the disequilibrium of new experiences is critical. Forced to make hard decisions that affect colleagues, inexperienced academic leaders often need to talk through their conflicts. They also may need reassuring when they begin "to question the adequacy of their skills, frameworks, and approaches" (Velsor, McCauley, and Moxley, 1998, p. 11). They may need assistance in recognizing that comfort zones inhibit growth and effectiveness (McCauley, Moxley, and Velsor, 1998). Challenging experiences can overwhelm or open one up for learning—those nurturing new leaders must confirm and reinforce positive steps toward independence and organizational viewpoints. Supporters, according to Velsor, McCauley, and Moxley (1998), should "listen to stories of struggle, identify with the challenges, suggest strategies for coping, reassure in times of doubt, inspire renewed effort, celebrate even the smallest accomplishments, and cheer from the sidelines" (p. 16). Peers, former bosses, and current bosses can all participate in the support network. Organizational norms and procedures can also be a source of structure and support (Velsor, McCauley, and Moxley, 1998).

Motivation to learn and grow needs nurturing. "Support helps engender a sense of self-efficacy about learning, a belief that one can learn, grow and change. The higher their self-efficacy, the more effort people exert to master challenges, and the more they persevere in difficult situations" (McCauley, Moxley, and Velsor, 1998, p. 16). Inexperienced academic administrators need to know that mistakes are acceptable and that open
examination of those mistakes is a step toward growth. They also need to have developmental experiences in data-based decision making. Many faculty assume department head roles, and some even rise to the level of dean or vice president without ever learning how to build a schedule or make faculty teaching assignments. They are not taught to review student credit hour production by individual and by discipline, analyze faculty productivity, or manage class enrollments (monitoring cancelled sections, closed sections, and underenrolled sections). Many have never heard of a facilities utilization report, which can be instrumental in meeting student needs and maximizing resources. All of these data-driven analyses should be taught through mentoring or work sessions conducted by seasoned administrators. Aspiring administrators would do well to heed the advice of General Colin Powell (2001): “Never neglect details. . . . Pay attention to details.”

Conclusion

Identifying, nurturing, and supporting potential leaders are critical components in maintaining a pipeline for continuity and infusion of new pools in academy administration. Higher education institutions that prepare for the future will have an identification strategy and developmental plan that not only provides for the next generation of leaders but also ensures that they have the experiences and skills necessary for success. The mobility of faculty complicates such planning, but careful identification and nurturing will keep the pipeline flowing. From the initial entry into the pipeline of academic leadership to the highest levels of vice president, provost, or even president, future leaders should be made fully aware of the responsibilities and accountability required of leaders.

Powell (2001) astutely sums up the essence of such responsibility and accountability: “Command is lonely. Harry Truman was right. Whether you’re a CEO or the temporary head of a project team, the buck stops here. You can encourage participative management and bottom-up employee involvement, but ultimately the essence of leadership is the willingness to make the tough, unambiguous choices that will have an impact on the fate of the organization. I’ve seen too many non-leaders flinch from this responsibility. Even as you create an informal, open, collaborative corporate culture, prepare to be lonely” (slide 9).

With such a dismal warning, why would anyone want to be a leader, especially an academic leader? Bennis (1989a) believes the dearth of leaders can be attributed to the traditional spirit of American individualism, which translates into self first and others last. Add to this environment the relentless scrutiny and criticism of public servants, and the motivation to serve in a leadership role diminishes further. Today’s culture supports the premise that the demands and negativism are not worth the sacrifice. How, then, can we get individuals with ability and integrity to seek leadership positions? I believe it is only through setting an example that builds values.
If faculty and rising administrators know what an institution stands for, they will likely be more willing to assume leadership roles. If leaders at the top of the institution demonstrate consistent values over a long period of time, others will share those values and will be motivated to pay the price of academic leadership. Inspiring others to share the vision is perhaps the most critical aspect in attracting and nurturing new leaders. Commitment to making a difference in the lives of others is the ultimate motivation.

References


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