

Introduction

In the 1970s, the traditional priorities of college governments were disrupted by a powerful combination of faculty and student activists who wanted to gain a voice in the decision-making. Although the movement didn't last long, it did have a profound effect on the way we think about leadership. It was the recognition of the faculty, as both the architects and the beneficiaries of change, and the realization that we had to be in charge of our own destiny. It was a time when we had to be in charge of our own destiny. It was a time when we had to be in charge of our own destiny.

**Abstract**

What special qualities are necessary to an educational leader in the '80s? A college president speaks openly.

**Sommaire**

Quelles sont, pour les années 80, les qualités spéciales indispensables aux chefs de file du monde de l'éducation? Un président de collège en parle ouvertement.

## Leadership — a personal perspective

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### Introduction

As the 1970s began, traditional patterns of college governance were subjected to a powerful onslaught from faculty and student activists who wished to gain a stronger voice in campus decision-making. Although this movement affected four-year institutions more than it did the community colleges, administrators everywhere found their influence reduced, either by the democratization of governing structures, or by the unionization of the faculty, or both. The academic and experiential background of many administrators did not prepare them for the sudden transition, so it was not an easy time to be in charge of institutions of higher education. A healthy percentage of senior college posts, particularly the presidencies, changed incumbents during this traumatic era, which was spawned from the United States civil rights movement, Vietnam, and the attitudes of the "laid back" generation of students reared under Dr. Spock's theories.

Those times were nevertheless good for higher education. Enrolments continued to increase in unprecedented numbers, and monies for capital expansion flowed from a buoyant economy. Post-secondary education enjoyed considerable societal prestige because the general public still believed that more academic credentials for all would produce economic well-being and a more fulfilling lifestyle. Thus, despite the confrontations and the financial/enrolment crunch which loomed inevitably ahead, not a great deal was done to prepare leaders who could effectively cope with the new circumstances. Too many institutions saw the social and economic conditions as temporary aberrations from the normal, cyclical order of things, rather than as signals that the structures and management styles of colleges were being irreparably altered.

With the advent of the 1980s, it is apparent that such a view was, if not simplistic, shortsighted. There is a complexity of issues presently facing educators which makes it even more difficult to manage colleges effectively. These include the prospect of permanent, double-digit inflation and budgets which do not correspond; demanding faculties organized into collective bargaining units, sometimes province wide; the rapid shifting of curriculum and programming to meet the enrolment and recruitment trends dictated by job markets; increased control by departments of education leaning toward centralization; and a wary public that wishes increased accountability and institutional evaluation for its substantial tax dollars. All of these factors make it mandatory that there be a rethinking of contemporary college administrative viewpoints and priorities.

The function of institutional leadership takes on considerable importance. If it is to bring the colleges into focus with reality, as well as provide a balance of tradition, motivation, morale, innovation, and accountability. Moreover, there is a need for a serious re-examination of the qualities and experience necessary to fill senior leadership positions during this decade. Certainly the day has gone when the college president was simply a well-regarded academic who acted as titular leader for a set term of office. Any incumbent must of course be credible academically or he or she will never be accepted as a leader by the professional staff. But the president must also be cognizant of, and capable of dealing with, the myriad of issues mentioned in the preceding paragraph, which all too frequently are far removed from so-called academic concerns.

While one cannot overlook the vestiges of collegiality which remain important to faculty, nor the fact that students will demand their rights when necessary, traditional structures of collegiality are increasingly giving way to political/adversarial models of decision-making. It follows that colleges are no longer academic communities removed from the restraints and rules of the private sector. Subject to governmental regulations and the terms of collective agreements, administrators are increasingly becoming more bureaucratic and political as they seek to control the variables with which they must deal.

In that context, colleges must look for a new breed of leader. Today's educational manager must cope simultaneously with the views of faculty unions, students, boards of governors, and government while having a sound background in pedagogy and andragogy, finance, labour law, and physical planning. And all this must be viewed within the framework of constantly interrelated patterns of collegial, bureaucratic, and political models of governance.

In this article, four aspects of college leadership will be discussed. One will be a contemporary theoretical perspective; the second will describe some peculiarities of colleges as complex organizations; the third will list some of the personal qualities considered desirable in a person occupying a leadership post; and the fourth will offer some suggestions which may help to increase one's effectiveness as a college leader.

### **A perspective on leadership**

There is some disagreement as to what constitutes institutional leadership. Some say it is the pragmatic management of human resources; others say that it is sound administration which includes the supervision of, and ultimate responsibility for, decision-making. While these perspectives are important in assessing the overall effectiveness of any

stewardship, it is this writer's view that leadership is the process of motivating others to do that which the leader determines must be done. In the college context, this means that the majority of personnel is prepared to follow the leader's direction in attaining a specific set of objectives relating to the stated college mission.

Ideally, because the college is above all an educational and a human organization, the leader must possess some degree of charisma and be able to inspire those he/she leads. To be effective, a leader must stand for a certain ideology, and must be able to crystallize and personify the principles, values, and aspirations of the college, and shift direction if necessary. By astutely fusing personality strengths to the political and operational forces at play in the college, the leader makes decisions and attempts to make his/her tenure of office successful. The complexity of governance and the relative freedom of constituency groups to voice dissent can cast doubt as to the leader's effectiveness even when he/she possesses outstanding personal skills and an excellent feeling for the politics of the college. There are just too many intangibles in a college environment, and not enough ascribed power to overcome all difficulties with indefinite immunity. This point is further emphasized when one compares the real power possessed by college presidents with that possessed by managers in private enterprise.

Although power is to an extent bestowed through role, the president as chief executive officer is expected to recommend and implement policy, and to interpret collective agreements, and is the only real conduit to external board members. Acceptance by, and influence on college personnel is not given readily; it must be carefully achieved over time. In fact, now it is even more difficult to gain real acceptance, because for some the adversarial structure of union vs. management dictates that the weaknesses of the leadership be constantly probed and exploited. A leader must demonstrate an ability to shift behavioural patterns with the changing situations in order to ensure the respect necessary for power. This behaviour will be tested repeatedly by members of the college community, so the leader must be prepared to review his/her actions at all times.

The college leader thus relies largely on personal influence achieved through the combination of personal behaviour (for example, *modelling* and force of persuasion or argument), along with sensitive decision-making to accomplish the goals he/she has defined. The chances of success will be enhanced if a positive relationship with the followers is developed with the knowledge that they have developed a good level of confidence in their leader. Only the foolhardy would attempt to administer solely on the basis of ascribed power. To do so would produce at best a Pyrrhic victory and in time the faculty would topple such an incumbent. Even the most secure and well accepted

leaders eventually use up good will and allegiances through conflict and strong resolution to problems. Without other personal qualities, the leader's support systems inevitably begin to erode.

The most effective leaders recognize this fact and work within the limitations set by such a tenuous position. They look for respect, but never for popularity. The latter can be only a fleeting and fickle concept, especially when personal ideologies and emotions are a part of the decision-making process, as they inevitably are in college issues. Effective leaders try to maximize the potential of available resources without involving personal ego. They do not mind who gets the credit as long as the college's goals as they perceive them are being realized nor do they need to be experts in any given field. On the contrary, a well-rounded generalist might be in a better position to settle campus issues rather than specialists who lack multi-faceted training and experience, or whose approach is too insular.

Every college leader must carve out a format for coping with a particular environment. Operational styles will naturally vary from person to person, but the most successful will be those who can adapt their style to the many different factors and situations. In short, a judicious mix of administrative behaviour ranging all the way from democratic to autocratic is necessary. Of course, a good leader is one who has an accurate picture of a given situation, clear understanding of the people involved, and an effective response to the issues in question.

### **College peculiarities**

It is important to understand and to overcome several factors which set colleges apart from other organizations and present particular leadership problems. First, the roots of tradition are strong in almost every college. Thus the ability to adjust quickly to pressing concerns and to new philosophical positions is constantly compromised. Faculty members who are most liberal in socio-political issues are generally conservative on campus matters, especially matters which concern them directly, such as curriculum. Despite the management rights of the administration, faculty members are able to successfully block decisions with which they disagree through the traditional channels of collegial governance, auto-evaluation or tenure, acquired rights, the college's established traditions, and now unionization. As a result, leadership strategies for change have to be carefully orchestrated. At the best of times there is always a strong pressure to maintain the status quo. Indeed, it is usually only in time of crisis or replacement of an incumbent that leadership can assume an aggressive role in pushing for change.

Secondly, the hierarchical structure of a college is often unlike the chain of command in private industry. Control is seldom direct. With the possible exception of hospitals and the civil service, colleges employ a greater percentage of professional staff than any other organization. This makes the college climate subject to the highly independent behaviour and intellectualism often displayed by its large numbers of professional academics. Many colleges also engage a significant number of part-time staff who, having their primary commitment outside, do not feel an emotional attachment to the college. To expect compliant behaviour, accepted elsewhere as a matter of course through such tools as transfer, promotions, and dismissal, is unrealistic for colleges dealing with a professional staff which often has little interest in being "promoted". The unstructured and sometimes unsupervised working conditions which many college professors enjoy allow for freedom from organizational sanctions. When leadership must contend with these powerful vested interests which have little to lose by confronting management on any issue, yet another ingredient is added to the mixture.

Thirdly, unlike most other organizations, which provide some product or service for an external clientele, the college's product — the students — are physically present, actually forming part of the organization. As such, they can talk back and make demands which a manufacturer's new shoes never could. Students also change their attitudes and perspectives almost overnight as indicated by the differences in outlook of the activist students of 1970 and the conservative students of 1980. Colleges must constantly be prepared to meet the changing concerns of its clients, while often simultaneously opposing their position. (The content and compulsory nature of the curriculum is a continual case in point). Moreover, there is simply no right answer when measuring the performance of the college, unlike a business enterprise, which has hard data concerning sales, profits, etc. Certain judgments are made by the leader in the best interest of the college, but these are inevitably subjective and temporary. The only constant is the raw human material being processed to emerge possessing academic credentials. Although it is assumed, there is no guarantee that this product will contribute gainfully to society nor that one has been made a better person as a result of one's college experience. Because no one has the magic formula to ensure that these things happen, there is continuous debate between the students and the college.

Fourthly, motivating the college personnel is becoming increasingly difficult. With the advent of unions on campus, and the shifting of attention to serious bread-and-butter issues, faculty dedication to the institution has weakened. Over the past twenty years, two other trends have already started weakening the fabric of institutional loyalty. One

has been the move away from allegiance to the college towards an allegiance to the discipline *per se*, and to professional associations. The other more serious trend was that for too many the college had become a secondary interest. This trend which saw the use of the college job to sustain another activity, be it playwright or gentleman farmer, has now taken firm hold. Many college personnel are themselves products of the counter culture of the 60s, and today this is manifested in their lifestyles. In addition, moonlighting for economic necessity or as an entrepreneurial business venture has long contributed to a weakening of institutional commitment.

Finally, there exists an intangible but discernable tunnel vision in the socio-economic and political perspective of college professionals. The ivory tower mentality seems to insulate many from the nature of the real world and its problems. Worse still, there is a feeling that colleges are exempt from the same rules to which the rest of the population is subject. Today there is a reduced work load and perhaps evidence of less competence without any graduate student demands or research requirements. This seems especially unrealistic when college salaries in Canada are compared to those which private industry would be prepared to pay for similar services.

### **Personal leadership qualities**

Although no one person can embody all the qualities that would be desirable in a leader, any effective incumbent should possess strength in the areas of administration, style, and personal attributes. In administrative terms, the leader must first have vision, and be able to adopt a broad view rather than a narrow one. While many people possess technical skills, and a good number are also strong in the human, interpersonal domain, only a few conceptualize well, and are able to grasp the large picture of the organization and what it will look like a few years hence. In that context, the leader must set realistic personal goals and goals for the college, and recognizing legal and contractual restrictions, be practical in attempting to attain the goals. Leaders must demonstrate initiative and instill motivation in seeking to control events rather than letting events control them. The best leaders will be those who are prepared to take risks while accepting accountability for failure, as well as the consequences for overplaying their hand.

Leaders must possess sound judgment rooted in common sense, and be prepared to make firm, uncompromising decisions. They must possess a skin thick enough to withstand the critics who feel they must dispute their decision. High tolerance levels for frustration and ambiguity should also be leadership qualities, for they will be tested frequently in the decision-making process of the college. Most impor-

tant, the leader must have courage and be willing to stand alone in the face of the inevitable conflict which accompanies contentious issues.

Regarding style, and acknowledging the political nature of the organization, the leader must be prepared to trust his/her team and delegate significant items of responsibility to them. It is a foolish or insecure leader who attempts to retain all control. At any rate, subordinates with self-respect, intelligence, dignity, and a healthy amount of ambition would not tolerate this situation for long. They would either seek to overthrow the leader or tender their own resignation.

The leaders should also be sensitive to group loyalties, particularly among their senior colleagues, and encourage critical observations prior to decision-making, in order to receive the best feedback and to involve others in the problem solving activity. The most secure leaders will be prepared to alter their judgment in the face of new information, and if necessary should be willing to admit error, a factor easier to state than to honour. Their minds should be flexible, open to change, and continually prepared to question themselves, not just others. They should be task-oriented, and clearly competitive in pressing for adoption of their position. It is very important to learn to lose without remorse, to win without gloating, and to control any impulses to revenge adversaries. One should remember that the followers invariably outlast their leaders, and that those who feel they have been badly treated often harbour resentment for a very long time.

There are many personal qualities leaders must possess in order to retain strength and balance. Among the most important are confidence and a positive self-concept to handle the day-to-day emotional drain of the adversarial rite of passage. They must also develop the maturity and self-respect which allows for each issue to be kept in its proper perspective. In addition, by adopting a personal code of ethical behaviour and by dealing as honestly and fairly as possible with everyone, college leaders should be able to gain respect even from critics. In this way the leader sets a model standard that the college as a whole will gradually follow.

There are also some qualities which can go a long way towards helping leaders survive, not only on the job, but afterwards. They must work hard to hone their communication skills. Not only is it important that people know what the leader means, but in the arena of the intellectual where the use of language is currency and sometimes its manipulation, it is mandatory that leaders hold their own in debate and articulate their position. It also helps to have a sense of humour, and to be a little irreverent about oneself and the job. Many a person has fallen simply by taking himself too seriously.



Finally, leaders should possess great staying power and be able to outlast their opponents by maintaining better than average physical health. This is of utmost importance in achieving the other necessary leadership qualities. For maintaining sanity and keeping a healthy perspective, they should pursue several outside interests, and not let the college consume their whole being.

### **Some operational factors**

A solid knowledge of leadership and organizational behaviour theory, an understanding of the organizational peculiarities of colleges, and an abundance of leadership qualities provide a promising framework for anyone assuming a leadership role. They do not always guarantee success, however. Several operational variables can spell success or failure, depending upon the way the leader chooses to treat them. In short, the leader's finesse in handling issues and intuitive reading of situations will not only influence the ultimate success of his/her stewardship; but style can frequently compensate for other deficiencies. For that reason, what follows is a brief discussion of six factors to be borne in mind by all those in leadership positions.

- The primary function of leaders is to set the tone which creates the atmosphere of the institution. They should strive to create a healthy organization in terms of motivating and preparing personnel to accept and to participate in the evolutionary growth of the institution. While developing a stimulating environment which affords professional staff the opportunity to perform at capacity, they must nevertheless ensure that they are in control of this activity. In no way can they allow this function to be usurped, lest they be left constantly reacting to the initiatives of others, rather than moving forcefully to accomplish their own objectives. Leaders do not have to be particularly original in their game plan. No one has a monopoly on good ideas and no one should feel guilty borrowing from others; but the leader does have to make things happen at the college on his or her own terms.
- Leaders would be unwise to be "invisible" and must be available to the college when necessary. But they must allow ample time for thinking and planning. Although a precise plan of action on a given issue needs room for adjustment, leaders should have a sound prognosis as to the outcome, and devise strategies to that end. Special time to be alone should be allocated, and one should feel perfectly comfortable thinking, rather than attending to a more obvious task. In fact, it is questionable whether leaders are doing their job properly if they do not provide this time, even though others may consider them to be more effective when they can actually see them busy.

To facilitate this, leaders should be prepared to delegate extensively, supervising but never so strictly as to strangle initiative and output. They cannot afford to become immersed in the details of many day to day items, because to do so would take valuable time from global, long-term, and conceptual considerations. Besides, they can always hire specialists to perform many technical and functional tasks. But there can be no delegating of the broad institutional planning which is ultimately the responsibility of the leader.

Leaders must clearly delineate the ground rules upon which the institution will operate, and be honest and consistent in the *modus operandi*. Generally, they should be prepared to consult the senior team on administrative and policy planning, and to utilize a system of shared decision-making as much as possible. It is unrealistic to try to do this on all matters, however. Therefore, the senior team must know what input it can expect to make on a particular item, and how the decision will finally be reached. Senior staff members must be advised which matters will be settled by consensus, or by vote, or the leader's decision after debate, and which ones will be deferred for further discussion or reponse from other groups. If senior staff members sincerely feel they are part of a team which plays a key role they will also accept that they cannot expect to be involved in settling every issue. The leader should never try to manipulate them if it means that he/she is not honouring normal procedures. If a leader has consistently built respect, others can trust him/her to deviate from time to time. When people know where they stand, and have been fairly evaluated, they have a genuine sense that their input is valuable. As a result, morale will be high and they will probably manage their own areas of responsibility with a similarly healthy perspective on decision-making.

- The nature of the college community suggests it is wise to remember that *process* is often as important as *product*. Although credibility, trust, and timing are all key ingredients, *how* an action is performed can be as critical as *what* the action is. If those affected clearly understand the process to be followed in decision-making and change, and they are consulted as much as possible, they will feel more comfortable about whatever action is taken. This applies even to those who disagree. The procedure avoids building unnecessary resentment for if people understand the process and accept it, they are less likely to impede changes, even those which they deem unnecessary.

- It is critical to be sensitive to the informal power groupings in the college, and to have political awareness in dealing with campus issues. Such behaviour should not be seen as unethical or manipulative. On the contrary, conditions dictate that one has to guard one's flanks against sniping attacks from vested interest cliques in order to lead and, sometimes, to survive. In this connection, the leader must know

the college intimately, build a top-notch team of senior people, know who one's supporters are, and carefully build a power base with them. A leader must guard against radical elements, never allowing the latter to gain a foothold in dominating fundamental issues. While college leadership may be termed an educational occupation, it is a very political activity, one where issues frequently present win-lose propositions to the participants. Wise leaders know that they can lose many battles as long as they win the war, but not the reverse. They have to see issues in long-term perspective and never allow pride or ego to circumvent a process which they believe to be morally, politically, and administratively correct for the college over the long haul.

Political astuteness in a leader is especially important as those at the top may have a general lack of understanding of the complexity of issues facing them. Being concerned primarily with the issues that affect them directly, professionals and academics may tend to demonstrate a restricted rather than a global view. Further, there exists a lack of acceptance of accountability even when there is direct sharing in the decision. Therefore, the leader should expect to be the scapegoat when things go wrong because a frustrated faculty can only blame those who are above them, just as the administration in turn will sometimes blame external forces, such as the board or the government. The most successful leader will view this state dispassionately, accepting the situation realistically rather than personally, and thus be able to retain a viable working relationship with college personnel. The key is to not allow an irreversible gap to widen between the leader and the others, and for the leader to continue to seriously listen to others' views, despite their sometimes negative attitudes. In short, is necessary for the leader to retain an honest and democratic perspective, while retaining control.

- Wise leaders will know their limitations and never exceed their capacity to cope. Inevitably, there exists a certain loneliness at the top, which is increased as popularity wanes, even when they act in ways that are just and right. However, the leader has to learn to live with human nature. Invariably vociferous, negative feedback is readily available while positive comment is not. The respect of the constituents, when coupled with his/her own self respect, should be enough to sustain the leader.

Recognizing that they are just human beings, however, and that the stress level is extremely high, leaders must be careful not to surpass their maximum potential workload or to maintain it at an intense rate for too long. Nor can they afford to be, in addition to their normal duties, a psychological crutch for those in the college who cannot cope effectively on and off the job. Finally, they should accept that they cannot go on forever as leaders, nor should they try to, in the best interests of both themselves and the organization.

To that end, leaders must motivate and groom top lieutenants for a smooth transition of leadership. They can take little satisfaction from seeing an institution drift as a result of the void their departure has created. No one is indispensable — a factor which is very hard for some to accept. In the final analysis, all leaders would be wise to remember that the heart of the matter has changed very little over time. As evidence, the words of Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher writing about 300 B.C., remain singularly poignant:

“A leader is best when he is neither seen nor heard,  
Not so good when he is adored and glorified, Worst  
when he is hated and despised. Fail to honour peo-  
ple, they will fail to honour you; But of a good lead-  
er, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, The peo-  
ple will all say, ‘We did this ourselves’.”