

CHAPTER 1

Unsuccessful Leadership Models

Dr. Green became the chair of a chemistry department a year ago when he came to the university from another prestigious university. Although he had never been a chair, he had secured a number of research grants and had a number of people working on these grants. The selection committee was impressed with his credentials (several million dollars in grants) and believed that his record and name would lift the department to new heights. Because the department had only fifteen faculty members, the administration believed that the chair could effectively lead and manage this group. They were sure that his grant writing and management success would translate into a successful department administrator. As you might expect, Dr. Green was able to negotiate a well-equipped lab and continuation of travel to fulfill his obligations as an international scholar.

Let's fast-forward and see how Dr. Green is doing now. In his administrative evaluation session, he complains that the administrative tasks are overwhelming and he is not spending enough time in his lab (his first love). His faculty members indicate that he is out of town so often that staff have to deal with issues or they

have to wait until he returns, and other people have to cover his classes. And it's unclear how the functions of research, teaching, and service fit together in the department. Some in the department have the impression that only research is important to him, and one member suggests that with the present emphasis the department is essentially becoming a research institute.

Even though this is a scenario built from multiple situations, it illustrates some issues that higher education needs to address in terms of administration selection and operation. The administration needs to recognize its assumptions about Dr. Green's strengths and abilities, how well he will work with the rest of the department, and the assumptions of the department based on past chairs.

First, there is an assumption that the skills that made Dr. Green a successful research professor will transfer to being a successful department chair. They assume that his project management skills will translate to effectiveness as a chair leading a wide range of people. Yet we know that these are two different sets of skills. Second, they assume Dr. Green, who has been successful through a narrowly focused agenda, would change his focus to the bigger picture of not only the department operations but also how the department fits into the university. This is one of the greatest failings of unsuccessful chairs; they don't let go of their previous role and allegiance.

Third, colleagues see the chair as competing for resources because he has inside knowledge and a strong research network to use. In our research on chairs, faculty members commented that being a role model was different from being a competitor whom these high-profile chairs sometimes became (Wheeler, Seagren, Becker, Kinley, Mlinek, & Robson, 2008).

Fourth, they assume the chair will be able to deal interpersonally with faculty members and staff and that he or she will get to know them and appreciate what they offer even if a number may not have strong research credentials or background and yet are essential to the operation. Fifth, the department has a previous history of expecting that the chair be available to address the

everyday issues that invariably arise. Yet externally connected chairs are often away from the office building to maintain their research work.

Given this scenario, is it any wonder that many chairs often are unsuccessful and find the position unmanageable particularly when they continue to place a high premium and time commitment on their scholarship? No doubt you've heard it everywhere—the chair is the most important administrative position in the institution. Yet these positions turn over quickly with the average life of four to five years (other administrators also typically have tenures of similar length). Some suggest the position is too demanding, others indicate that those in the position lose their academic credentials if they remain for more than five years; still others say it's a choice problem—we just need to select the right people.

As a consultant to many chairs, and a former chair myself, I have watched people in these positions see the workload increase, be pulled in so many directions that they just try to cope with the demands, and receive little appreciation for their efforts by either department members or administrators. My belief is that part of the problems with how chairs and other administrators are selected and sustained is that the leadership models or philosophies that are used do not consider the demands of the job, the skills needed, or the long-term effects. Let's look at a few examples.

Administrator as father or mother figure. Administrators sometimes develop a relationship with their faculty members, staff, and students that is similar to being a parent. In this role, everyone brings a problem to the parent and expects that he or she will solve the problem. What happens is an expectation by the followers that the next time they have a problem they will return to the administrator—think parent—to solve the problem. Not only is this time consuming for the administrator but a dependency is also created in which the people with the problem really haven't developed their own problem-solving skills and taken responsibility.

Effective parents and administrators understand developing responsibility is a process that develops over time, but in this case institutional leaders are dealing with people who should be treated as adults and who are capable of solving their problems. I have observed a pattern in which colleagues won't even attempt to resolve issues between them but would rather go to the administrator who interacts with them separately. Not only does this pattern occupy much time and attention, but it also reduces the development and use of any negotiation skills among the players.

Administrator as firefighter. Other administrators are so busy putting out fires that they don't have time for important leadership activities such as reflection, visioning, planning, and investing-in-others development. Sometimes situations require that this leadership style be used, but when it becomes the dominant modus long-term goals will be sacrificed. Possibly a department or college is in such a state that the processes and people are not in place to move to a different stage. There are also situations when administrators perceive themselves as problem solvers and they create problems to solve—sometimes the bigger the better! Being at the center of issues can certainly provide a sense of self-importance and indispensability, but it can be all consuming and take away from long-term goals and development responsibilities.

Administrator as the role. Some administrators put on their administrator hat when they head for the office and never take it off. In this case the role provides formal authority and some insulation from the ups and downs of office relationships. The belief is that if everything is just defined, procedures are in place, and the administrator treats everyone equally, there won't be any major problems. Administrators in these situations are perceived as bureaucrats or technicians who are experts at covering their behinds and hiding behind the role. These administrators are thought of as not authentic and often with little personality.

Administrator as transactional leader. This model is based on the idea that everyone is motivated by external rewards—particularly

money and exchanges of this for that. Thus if a chair or other administrator wants faculty members to accept additional duties or change instructional methods, he or she can influence them by an external reward. This orientation can lead to ignoring the intrinsic motivation of faculty members and can eventually lead to a situation in which people will only do what they are explicitly rewarded for. Comments from faculty members and staff about doing anything beyond their usual work are characterized by “it’s not part of my job description” or “what is the reward for doing this?” This model was particularly effective when institutions were attempting to carefully control the management process. Even if it were an effective model in changing institutions, most administrators, particularly chairs, don’t have enough control over the reward system to make it work.

Administrator as micromanager. Some administrators operate in a fashion that suggests that they have to see and approve everything. This may be a control issue or belief that only they can do things correctly. Or the administrators may be protecting themselves from a bad outcome because someone did not perform as expected or there was a lack of confidence that others could do the work. Not only is this strategy a time drain for the administrator and the people involved but it also sends a message that the administrator doesn’t believe associates or unit members will meet their responsibilities and achieve the expected standards. Does this mean the leader should just assign tasks and then stand back and wait for the results? Effective leaders know they must monitor periodically and also know which people will require more supervision and mentoring.

Laissez-faire leader. Administrators may see the role as little more than a maintainer, particularly when they didn’t want the position or may have been the only acceptable choice and therefore forced to take it. In this case the chair may perceive the situation as one in which the primary motivation is not to create enemies because shortly this temporary chair will be back in the faculty ranks.

Difficult problems will be ignored or deferred until “the permanent chair” is in place. Such an environment creates a power vacuum in which things either won’t get done or others, often without the formal authority or responsibility, will step forward because they see the need and are not willing to sit back and wait.

All of these styles are limited in their leadership potential. They are formal leader-centered approaches and don’t empower others to develop the involvement and commitment to be a part of a more integrated and synergistic environment. Too much time is spent sorting through responsibilities and often exacerbating problems. So even though administrators may have chosen the previously described styles in specific situations, when these become the dominant way of working, leadership and institutional culture is less effective and efficient. The long-term health and productivity of the unit and the institution will suffer. An analogy can be drawn from ropes with knots in that the more you pull on the ends of the rope the tighter the knots become. Powerful, effective leaders understand that just doing the same thing, only harder or more intensively, will not lead to a different outcome. It’s time we loosen the knots and find different ways to lead.

Farnsworth (2007), a community college president who writes about service leadership, captures the sense of frustration with organizations and their current style of leadership and the potential for change:

I personally find great comfort in my conviction that this great struggle can lead higher education in the direction most of us would choose to go anyway, given absolute choice toward great meaning in what we do, greater fulfillment in doing it and greater satisfaction in the result. And we do have that choice. We can recapture the vision and zeal that fired our early excitement about becoming servants in the field of education. We can extend that servant-first enthusiasm into building

new leadership approaches that will transform our institutions, our profession and public confidence in what we do. (p. 21)

My belief is that much of today's leadership is not sustainable, particularly in terms of the involvement of the people in the institution who have to play a major role in seeing and making changes when much of the future is conceptualized and driven by a few people in formal leadership roles. Administrators will be more isolated and expected to carry the burden of making the decisions. Without an intensive engagement of those involved, institutions will have a long road with administrators carrying a heavy burden and with a balking, often resistant, workforce who operate without the passion and commitment to carry the organizations forward. This book suggests that to gain long-term commitments, have effective relationships, and nurture a work environment in which people thrive, and to provide service to others, servant leadership is a philosophy to consider.