# LEARNING TO LEAD,
# LEADING TO LEARN

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# Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

## A Collaborative Syllabus for Higher Education Leadership

Edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher

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CHAPTER 5

# Practice Giving as a Way of Learning Leadership

**Jeffrey T. Grabill,** *University at Buffalo, State University of New York*

The week I sat down to write the first draft of this chapter, I was in a meeting on "listening and leadership," and I had a conversation there with a colleague who asked me a question about where and how I learned to be a leader. The question and the conversation focused on how and where academics learn to lead and made me think about where in my career I learned to lead.

There was never any direct instruction. I taught for a long time, including, delightfully, lots of first-year students. I researched, wrote, revised, and resubmitted. I started and led a research center. I became a department chair not because I wanted to but because I felt I needed to, and that kicked off a set of more senior roles that weren't part of a plan but have been fun and educational. Along the way, I have been led, ably and clumsily, and I have led myself, ably and clumsily. As a way into this chapter and drawing from those experiences, let me start with some patterns that have been descriptive of my experiences in higher education and that have become resources for how I think about leadership.

1. We tend to confuse management and leadership. These are two different and often complementary ways of thinking and behaving, and most leadership development in higher education that I have seen or experienced is focused on management. That is, the programming is likely to cover issues like budgeting basics, managing promotion and tenure processes, hiring, or performance reviews and not the leadership issues I will address in this chapter. Academic cultures in the UK are heavily focused on management to the detriment of leadership conversations. Academics need both the tactical management skills and leadership skills that I would associate with what Beronda Montgomery describes as "cultivation and enactment of leadership philosophies and progressive vision" (2020, 1). We need higher education institutions to match the significant investments other organizations make in their people to develop effective leaders. We rarely see those investments.
2. For our most senior leaders, we want, as a former president of Georgetown University is said to have quipped, "God on a good day." This expectation is perhaps one reason why we are so disappointed with our leaders. This might also be one reason that senior roles are unattractive to those who might be good at them—and why those same roles burn out those who take them. This speaks to the need for higher education to understand leadership and its development as part of everyone's career pathway. Doing so would provide us with a shared language, a shared sense of purpose, and hopefully shared humility about how difficult it is to lead and be led.
3. Leadership is a team sport, not an individual sport. If we select leaders focused primarily on their own goals and outcomes and reward that way of leading, we should expect outcomes directed toward individual rather than community advancement. This insight matters because we need leaders committed to making those around us better, building teams, and creating strong communities.
4. All work begins and ends in relationships. Break relationships, and there is nothing.

These patterns are foundational for how I think about leadership in higher education. Put simply, leadership is not management. Leaders create conditions for others to thrive. Leadership can never be transactional. It must be relational. This last issue, relationships, has

been bedrock for my entire career as a teacher, a researcher, a leader, and a human being. It is also the most fragile of principles because more often than not, the transactional trumps the relational. More challenging still, "short termism," or the drive to return immediate term results over longer term investments, dominates leadership and management incentives. Managing short-term outcomes may produce efficiency but is unlikely to produce effectiveness or community. If, as Paul LeBlanc (2020) argues, we live in a moment in which our social systems, including higher education, are fundamentally broken, then the way to put them together again requires leaders to dwell in the relational and long-term.

Effective leadership requires that we have ideas about how to lead and who we want to be, what I will call "dispositions" in this chapter. But for the most part, leadership lives in our behaviors, and ultimately it is our behaviors that tell others who we really are and which dispositions we embody. The nice thing is that we can practice behaviors, and in practicing, we learn and become. We can learn to lead by practicing, too, and one outcome of intentional practice (and learning) is that we become different sorts of people. We become leaders. To be concrete and focused in this chapter, I choose one behavior, and that is *to give*, which is something we can practice at any point in our career.

## Dispositions as a Leadership Foundation

I spent nearly twenty years of my career at Michigan State University (MSU), and in that time, as noted above, I was able to experience much of what higher education has to offer an academic. But I also had some unusual experiences, such as starting an educational technology company. Late in my time there, the provost asked me to take on a new role as an associate provost for teaching, learning, and technology. In my last year at MSU, influenced by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and leadership failures at that university (and my experience of how people responded to those failures), I decided to run an experimental version of one of our internal leadership development programs. That program was in my portfolio as an associate provost. I didn't think our existing approach, which was focused on didactic experiences and content that



I'd term management-focused, was appropriate for the moment. So we crafted an experience focused on an unusual (for MSU) set of leadership dispositions, cohort activities centered on reflection, and—since participants were in leadership roles—connecting our reflections to our day-to-day work as leaders.

The program started with some work on "leadership as learning," which established the program as genuinely developmental. In other words, the goal of the program and the work we did together was to enable participants "to *practice* and/or *perform* leadership" as our way to realize this developmental goal of leading and learning at the same time. What that meant varied by the participant, but one thing was shared. We wanted each participant to explore how to help *others* grow and improve. We then went on to work through the following dispositions:

- Purpose and vision
- Integrity and trust
- Curiosity

To which I will add here *kindness*, which I wish we'd included at the time. This list of dispositions is a good foundation for leadership if we are going to lead in ways focused on relationships and longer-term outcomes. But we would struggle to find these dispositions listed together in any "position description" for a senior leadership role at a college or university.

We spent the most time on purpose and vision in our program. With purpose and vision, our reading and reflection focused on the need to be clear with regard to purpose, both for oneself and with others, and on how to develop a shared vision related to that purpose. Purpose is a story about why we exist, and vision tells us where we are headed together. A focus on purpose was initially experienced as odd because in higher education our purpose, to many, seemed obvious. Yet upon reflection, it became clear that universities have many purposes, and they are sometimes in conflict.

We braided together integrity and trust because building trust requires acting with integrity. Trust seems such a rare commodity in the workplace (sadly), including academic workplaces, and building

trust requires overcoming skepticism if not also cynicism via behaviors such as predictability and consistency, listening well (see curiosity below), and connecting transparency with accountability. This last issue is particularly challenging in an organization with talented and creative people accustomed to high levels of autonomy and who want transparency but are less keen on accountability. When transparency and accountability are braided together, it can really supercharge a team or organization. As my colleague Michelle Hayward at Bluedog Design writes, "transparency fuels accountability. Talented people cannot be accountable for what they can't see or understand. The more effort that goes into fueling their ability to make great decisions for the business, given their proximity to the client outcomes, the greater our collective success" (Weiner 2018). That is, people in a team or organization need to be able to see and understand purpose and how the organization is trying to achieve that purpose in order for them to carry out their work effectively.

Curiosity is the leadership disposition that most surprised participants. It was not a disposition participants immediately associated with leadership (in contrast with something like "courage"). And upon reflection, we found it rare in our lived experiences of leadership.

We grounded our reading in the experiences of people in creative industries and those who work with creative professionals because that is the place to find a conversation about the role of creativity in effective teams. Yet I think it's obviously the case that people in higher education are highly creative, and literature on creativity in teams and organizations is insightful (e.g., Kelly and Kelly, 2015). In practice and as a set of behaviors, curiosity is often visible in those who listen well, those who seek to understand, and in those who ask genuine questions.

While we didn't reflect on kindness in that program, it is the disposition that I would add here based in particular on my leadership experiences post-pandemic. Kindness is a forgotten virtue and easily dismissed. It is not niceness (though being nice is, well, nice). Kindness requires us to be vulnerable. Kindness, as Barbara Phillips and Adam Taylor write in their book *On Kindness*, is "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself" (Phillips and Taylor 2010, 6). It is a



virtue grounded in empathy, curiosity, and perhaps most importantly, imagination, specifically "our imaginative capacity to identify with other people" (Phillips and Taylor 2010, 54). Kindness is one of the virtues that returns more than we give (more on giving below). That is, in imagining the lives of others, in identifying with what they might need from us, and in trying to provide that to them, we feel and become more fully human.

The leadership literature is full of dispositions, so they must clearly matter, though the relationship between dispositions and behaviors is sometimes challenging to see in that literature. I'd suggest that dispositions are essential because they index values. That is, dispositions point to or indicate values, and if one is practicing (and learning) leadership by way of a set of dispositions, there will be attendant values that should be visible in behaviors. Dispositions might constitute, along with other issues (e.g., good management guidance), part of a conceptual understanding of leadership. But I think it is important to understand *how* dispositions mean in leadership development and practice. They can be practiced and developed. They are both learned and revealed as a function of behaviors. Leadership is a *verb*. Our leadership dispositions (and cultures) live in our behaviors. The ways in which we behave don't simply express a set of dispositions. They are how we come to have them. Dispositions and leadership can be developed. They can be learned.

## Learning Leadership by Practicing Giving

The way that I think about learning leadership is shaped by my own intellectual history as a student of rhetoric, which is relevant in terms of how I will frame learning as having artistic qualities. By "artistic" I don't mean something like aesthetics. I mean *techne*: a transferrable body of knowledge that is typically composed of theoretical concepts to be learned, methods to guide practice, and lots of practice to realize benefits. Leadership is artistic in the sense that it has (any number of) theoretical frameworks and orientations (any leadership reading list would suggest so) and methods to guide practice. And like many such

things, leadership is learned by practicing: writing and revising, making and remaking, acting and reacting.

One pathway to learn to lead is for a learner to move from conceptual understanding (belief) into habits (behaviors) that become internalized, and based on that, transformation (becoming). This is an artistic pathway for the embodiment of a virtue: believe, behave, become. It is not a linear pathway—what we become is as much about our behavior as it is about what we believe. Dispositions are important because they are part of a conceptual understanding of what it means to be a leader or what leadership looks like. Dispositions started, at least for me, as ideas. But for a leadership identity to be coherent and fully artistic, those same dispositions must live in our behaviors. That is, if curiosity is part of our leadership practice, it's not enough to simply be an idea we believe in. We must behave with curiosity. If we do this enough (if we practice enough), then we are curious.

The answer to my colleague's question at the start of this chapter about how I learned to lead is "to practice," which should be understood in two ways: (1) as a habitual pattern of activity, and (2) as doing something again and again, to learn. I will focus more on the second meaning here. Practicing is the only way that behaviors become habitual. Practicing is the only way that the ideas we believe about leadership become part of our identity as a leader. Indeed, when we experience a gap between what a leader says they believe and what we observe in their behaviors, we are seeing something real. We are seeing, perhaps, an individual whose leadership practice and identity are in development. Or someone on a bad day. We might also be seeing a leadership practice that will be experienced as confusing and contradictory. What and how we practice determines who we become as leaders. If we aspire to lead with curiosity, for example, then we need to practice it. We can say we believe in curiosity all we want—we can claim the disposition—but we only become curious by behaving curious. We practice that curiosity as leaders by taking the time to get to know our colleagues, how they experience their work, and what motivates them. We practice curiosity by seeking to understand why people make the choices they make



or why systems produce the outcomes they produce before moving too quickly to solutions. Who we are as leaders is determined by the dispositions we express and the cultures we model via our behaviors.

To be clear, I want others to practice the behaviors that align with the dispositions I've shared in this chapter. I want my colleagues to be that kind of leader. I want to be led by that kind of a leader. In that regard, I am making an argument here for a set of leadership ideas. Yet the challenging part of the answer to my colleague's question that opens this chapter is located in what to practice as a way to *learn* leadership. There are any number of appropriate behaviors to practice that align with the dispositions above. I'm choosing giving here because giving is accessible to each of us. The barrier to practice is low.

In making that choice, I am guided here, as we were in that leadership program at MSU, by work such as Adam Grant's on giving. He provides an extended example. In his book *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success* (2013), Grant focuses on our interactions with others—what he calls, perhaps surprisingly, a neglected variable in success or failure. The fact that he names interactions between people as a neglected variable should tell us a great deal about why organizations and systems might be broken. He writes that "every time we interact with another person at work, we have a choice to make: do we try to claim as much value as we can, or contribute value without worrying about what we receive in return?" (Grant 2013, 4). Grant goes on to note that in the workplace, givers are rare. More common by far are takers or matchers (those who seek always to balance the scales). Givers are just as intentional as takers or matchers. Grant notes that if you're a giver at work, "you simply strive to be generous in sharing your time, energy, knowledge, skills, ideas, and connections with other people who can benefit from them" (Grant 2013, 5). Yet while givers are inclined to help others without expecting anything in return, that isn't always the case. They also do cost-benefit analyses and have their limits (I've learned that transactional people and relationships eventually drive me to set boundaries, for instance).

In a transactional workplace (and world), does giving give one an advantage? Does it win? Or is it for losers, just as kindness is wrongly thought to be for losers? Grant wrote a book on givers because it is valuable. But giving is complicated. As he works through some of the evidence early in his book for why giving might be useful, Grant notes that both the best and worst performers are givers. He notes that "the answer [to if it "works"] is less about raw talent or aptitude [among the givers], and more about the strategies givers use and the choices they make" (Grant 2013, 10). He goes on, "successful givers are every bit as ambitious as takers and matchers. They simply have a different way of pursuing their goals" (Grant 2013, 10).

To illustrate, Grant tells the story of a venture capitalist (VC) who is a giver—intentionally so—in a context in which there is lots of transactional, taking behavior. I want to use this story to provide more detail on what giving behaviors look like. I have no idea what dispositions our VC has or what he believes in. I don't know if he is curious or kind, though I suspect he might be. What we can see from this story is the intentional way that an individual *practices behaviors*.

As a giver, the VC shares ideas and insights. He gives away more time and attention than others. He invites competitors to share platforms with him. He takes less value in companies than other investors. Yet despite this—or maybe because of it, at least initially—the VC is rejected by an entrepreneur in whom he really wanted to invest and to whom he had given a great deal of time and a number of ideas. The entrepreneur felt our VC wouldn't challenge him enough.

Eventually the entrepreneur reconsiders his original decision and invites the VC to invest in a second (and typically less valuable) round. Our VC accepts the offer to invest in that second round, and not long after, he significantly contributes to the company's success. As we might expect given the argument of Grant's book, the VC's success isn't unique. Our giving VC is highly successful. He doesn't approach his work in this way because he is a good person or a nice person (he may be). It's not about his personality or his leadership dispositions, which are unknown to us. The VC behaves in this way because it works to help others grow



and develop, which is the core of his leadership practice (to help others succeed). For him, giving wins, and he practices it with intentionality.

Grant notes that most organizations approach leadership development by identifying high potential individuals and providing them with the support they need to develop. This seems reasonable, yet in an organization full of talented professionals, careful attention needs to be paid to what constitutes "talent." The talent that is in evidence in a successful researcher or a remarkable teacher might not be the same talents that align with the leadership behaviors and outcomes we want in our organizations. As we might expect, Grant isn't a fan of a talent-first approach to identifying leaders. For him, motivation to learn and grow is far more important. For me, I've learned to look for givers and for those with a record of building strong teams. They make others around them better. Grant argues that those who developed into high performers didn't necessarily start that way and weren't often identified early. That is, they didn't present as "talented," particularly early in their lives and careers. Instead, these individuals were often deeply interested in the work or craft or sport—we might say they were deeply *curious*—and they had teachers who were caring, kind, patient and made learning fun (Grant 2013, 104–105). That is, they were well led.

Grant's argument is that the best leaders are those capable of developing people into high performers and leaders, and again, that is certainly what I have learned in my own practice. The takeaway for organizations is to think differently about those we identify for leadership development and how we coach and support people into role-based leadership. Following Grant's lead, I wouldn't necessarily start with the "high performers," which in higher education is likely to be those with the strongest research metrics. I'd look for the dispositions that I've argued for here. I would look for those with purpose and vision, those who act with integrity, those who demonstrate curiosity, and those trusted by others. We see dispositions most clearly in behaviors, so what people do would be more important than what people say. I'd seek to develop those dispositions by providing people

with opportunities to practice in contexts that are caring, kind, patient, and risk tolerant.

Giving can be practiced, and I do believe that if one wants to learn to lead, practicing giving is the place to start. We can model and coach behaviors like giving. We can reward and reinforce them organizationally. In fact, we should be good at this in higher education because in many ways, giving runs deep in academic value systems. Most academics give away their intellectual capital every day. We teach. We are eager to publish our ideas and share them as widely as possible. For free. Many of us have made giving things away an explicit operating principle. The research center I ran with Bill Hart-Davidson for years at MSU was explicit in this regard, and that was one of the primary places in which we tried to model, mentor, and develop people.[1] We were intentional about creating platforms for people to share. We gave ideas away willingly in the expectation that in the end, much more would come back to us. And it did, mostly in the form of people who were curious and kind and loving.

Most importantly, one does not need to have a leadership role to practice a powerful leadership behavior. No matter who we are, no matter where we are located in higher education, and no matter what we do, we can choose to be a giver and practice giving each day in our work because leadership and its development must be part of everyone's career pathway. When we do that, we will learn a great deal about ourselves and others. We will learn what works and doesn't. We will learn when to stop giving. We will learn so much about the teams we are part of and the organizations we work in. In our teams and organizations, we will develop a shared language, a shared sense of purpose, and hopefully shared humility about how difficult it is to lead and be led. And if we

1 Bill was the Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies and a Professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures at Michigan State. We worked together for more than twenty years until he passed away suddenly and far too young in 2024. Bill was a giver, which can clearly be seen in this tribute to him: https://cal.msu.edu/news/associate-dean-remembered-for-personal-and-professional-impact-at-msu-and-beyond/.



stick with it, we will become a different sort of person. Perhaps a better person. Perhaps a leader.

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