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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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface | The Learner, The Broker, and the Giver: Leadership Journey Through the Dark Side | 1

*Chng Huang Hoon, Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre,
National University of Singapore*

Introduction Course Overview | 7

Part 1: Learning from Experience | 37

Chapter 1 | A Case Study in Presidential Leadership in Perilous Times: Rhetoric, Theater Training, and Life Experience | 43

Elaine Maimon, Governors State University

Chapter 2 | Leading Like a Teacher | 57

Emily Isaacs, Montclair State University

Chapter 3 | Learning to Lead without Authority: Accreditation and Assessment Mandates | 77

Chris Blankenship, Salt Lake Community College

Chapter 4 | Academic Leadership Beyond the Academy | 95

Heidi Estrem, Idaho State Board of Education

Chapter 5 | Practice Giving as a Way of Learning Leadership | 109

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

Chapter 6 | Lessons from a Black Feminist (Interim) Dean: Can I Bring My Authentic Self? | 121

Staci Perryman-Clark, Western Michigan University

Chapter 7 | Learning to Navigate Online Leadership: An Invitation to Collaborate for Group Project Skeptics | 141

Erin Lehman, Ivy Tech Community College

Chapter 8 | Listening as a(n Incomplete) Leader | 153

Beth Brunk, University of Texas at El Paso

Chapter 9 | Lessons Learned about Leadership | 169

Duane Roen, Arizona State University

Part 2: Theorizing Practice, Practicing Theory | 195

Chapter 10 | Learning at the Boundaries: Feminist Invitational Rhetoric and Sensemaking toward Deep Change | 201

Elizabeth Wardle, Miami University

Chapter 11 | Fugitive Learnings: An Endarkened Feminist Inquiry into Administrative Refusals and Creative Escapes | 217

Carmen Kynard, Texas Christian University

Chapter 12 | Language and Identity Politics in Leadership: Cultivating Comunidad | 237

Candace de León-Zepeda, Our Lady of the Lake University

Chapter 13 | An Imperative for Leadership & Institutional Transformation: Going Back to Code | 259

Jonikka Charlton, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Chapter 14 | Queering the Administrative Brew: A Possible Impossibility | 279

Jonathan Alexander, University of California, Irvine

Chapter 15 | Personal and Professional Identities, Belonging, and Change: The Process of Becoming | 299

Sheila Carter-Tod, University of Denver

Conclusion Final Class | 319

Index | 325

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PREFACE

The Learner, The Broker, and the Giver

Leadership Journey Through the Dark Side

Chng Huang Hoon, *Chua Thian Poh Community Leadership Centre, National University of Singapore*

“Learning to move past the abstraction, to think about people I sought to lead, their motivations, and the points of connection that we share—those are places where I was able to apply my knowledge to standing at the forefront of valuable institutional work, even where having no positional authority to demand that this work be done.”—Chris Blankenship, chap. 3, p. 78

“... if one wants to learn to lead, practicing giving is the place to start.”—Jeffrey Grabill, chap. 5, p. 119

It is not every day that someone knocks on our door and gives us a generous offer—to benefit from the wisdom derived from other people’s experiences in leadership. And so, when Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris Gallagher invited me to read their book manuscript and to provide a preface for it, in spite of my overflowing plate for the coming months, I just could not let this wonderful opportunity pass me by. I am so glad that I did not let this one go.

Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn: A Collaborative Syllabus for Higher Education Leadership is a gem of a book for at least three reasons:

1. This volume gathers a collection of stories from people who are learners first and leaders/brokers second; and in the process of

“accidentally” (for most) but intentionally leading, have learnt to lead. Now that this treasure trove of experiences is offered to us, we can benefit from this leadership playbook that I know will facilitate the leadership work of many first-time leaders or those who are like me, still learning how to lead in spite of decades in academic leadership.

2. Reading these stories has given learners like me much comfort because they tell me that someone out there is facing or has undergone the kind of challenges I have been living with leading in my own institution. Significantly, these stories demonstrate that there is no one way to lead, and that context matters in defining how one leads.
3. Finally, this collection provides us with a ready-made community of scholar-leaders that signals to us that we are not alone, we belong, *and* we matter. Their experiences inform us that there are many ways to lead well but only one way to lead happily, and that is when we listen to those we lead with an open heart and mind, humbly learning and collaborating with them as collegial friends, advocating for them through the work that we have been appointed to do.

Unlike Chris Blankenship (and Elizabeth Wardle, another contributor who writes about non-positional leadership), in my two decades of service as an academic leader in my institution, I did enjoy the privilege of positional authority. I chose Blankenship’s statement from chapter 3 as my opening quote because I share his view that it is crucial to “move past the abstraction, to think about people ... their motivations, and the points of connection we share” in any leadership work one does. Or, as Jeffrey Grabill says in chapter 5, “All work begins and ends in relationships” (p. 110). My own leadership experience involves much brokering between those I lead and those I report to. My journey has been informed by doing the work on a daily basis and regular self-questioning, and by observing senior colleagues/role models in action. I have recognized that while institutional goals are important, people matter even more. While “why lead?” is a fundamental starting point,

figuring out how we lead is in some ways even more essential. Colleagues' and students' welfare matter. And so, in doing change management in my university, I actively pay attention to the how. Because for me, the why is obvious—I give time and energy to enable other people's and institutional success. I am in full agreement that “respect is key in creating sustainable change” (Blankenship, chap. 3, p. 89) and “[h]ow we treat people matters” (Roen, chap. 9, p. 171) because quite frankly, collegial welfare and trust enable the work all leaders do.

I feel very grateful to the authors in this book who have reaffirmed and reminded me why I choose to devote time and attention to being an academic leader, and taught me about the joys and pitfalls of leadership. Their leadership narratives have also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on the liminal status of academics like me who have gone “to the dark side” (Isaacs, chap. 2, p. 60), reconciling one's scholarly career and the accidental path in academic leadership. Elsewhere, I have written about the challenges of doing work that matters (particularly on the personal plane) versus work that counts (i.e., institutionally rewarded; see Wu and Chng 2023). As academics, we are sometimes asked to choose between two seemingly unreconcilable career pathways. It is therefore both heartening and also empowering to read that many authors in this book have not only experienced this very same challenge of negotiating their identities as scholars-and-leaders, and that they have also, like me, concluded that the work is sufficiently meaningful in itself to persist down this path in spite of the rigid rules of the academy. Jonathan Alexander says it well: “Administrative work often rewards with immediate satisfaction or awareness of your impact (or conversely, your failure, to be sure). Such immediacy can be very satisfying” (chap. 14, p. 281). It is indeed satisfying, and I would go so far as saying, it can be a meaningful life of productive giving if one does work that can make a real difference in collegial and student welfare. As Adam Grant (2016) has said, “givers spend a lot of time trying to help other people and improve the team, and then, unfortunately, they suffer along the way” (n.p.). Like Grant, I believe our job is to help foster a culture where givers also get

to succeed—the dark side is not inevitable if we collectively work to make this work count.

Quite separate from making leadership work count in academia, I would like to offer the view that negotiating between an academic career and a leadership pathway can also be reconciled through the idea of brokering that is frequently raised in this collection. Traversing boundaries is something all effective leaders know and do well. I argue in favor of the scholarly leader whose leadership is informed by scholarship (as many authors in this volume have testified in terms of deploying their expertise in rhetoric in their leadership work) and scholarly work being framed in leadership terms. It seems unfortunate to me that as scholars who are more than mindful of false dichotomies, many in the professoriate still view scholarship and leadership as separate domains. I think there is a need for us to bridge these two terrains for they are essential to our roles as scholar-teacher-leader in institutions of higher learning.

In addition to triggering the above useful reflections, I have learnt several excellent lessons from this collection, too many to numerate. I would however like to highlight the two that I most appreciate, both gifted to me by Heidi Estrem in her chapter on “Academic Leadership Beyond the Academy” (chap. 4, p. 95). Estrem's emphasis on process over outcome in transactional task-driven management practice (as opposed to transformational leadership culture) has my endorsement. Citing Annie Duke (2018), Estrem iterates that “What makes a decision great is not that it has a great outcome. A great decision is the result of a good process . . .” (p. 100). If leadership work is all about building trust and connections, and enabling collegial/institutional welfare, then a focus on process, on building consensus through dialogue and negotiation is truer to the spirit of an inclusive institutional culture. This brings me to the other lesson Estrem underscores in her chapter: When it comes to culture building and change management, “more conversation is better than less” (p. 103). Importantly, too, as Jonathan Alexander cautions in his contribution, “our desire to create engagement and dialogue cannot always be on our terms” (p. 295)—we need

to listen, without prejudice or judgement to stakeholders' perspectives even as we work to drive the institution forward.

I cannot say enough how much I have enjoyed learning from the generous sharing by the authors whose experiences in leadership are captured in this important book. I wish to close this opening segment with a final point about stewardship, an issue close to my heart. For me, stewardship requires that we do not hold on to the privilege of (positional) leadership as some kind of personal lifelong project. Instead, all responsible leaders must in my view work towards obsoleting themselves. To this end, Jonathan Alexander's statement that "learning to lead is as much knowing when to step aside and let others take over as anything else" (p. 296) resonates for me. Leaders must have the grace and the humility to know when it is time to let go, step off, and allow succession planning to occur, for the sustainability of their organization.

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