



DEVELOPING NEW LEADERS: GUIDING CONCEPTS TO INCREASE YOUR SUCCESS

By Jason Dewling and Michael Rivera

The first days in a position can be challenging for any new leader, especially if you are facing the job relatively young. You have a great vision for your organization, and more than anything you want to make your department stronger for your students to support their success. However, you probably have never had to perform on this level before and, to add to the pressure, this may be your first and only chance to do things right in the eyes of others. Faculty that have served in the department for many years now report to you, and they might have even played a part in hiring you for your current position. You may have spent time socially on weekends talking about the “higher ups” and now you are one of them. How should you proceed?

Young leaders are often promoted and rise through the ranks because they are independent and ambitious. They are often great at task completion. However, once in leadership, young leaders need to learn how to be interdependent and utilize the knowledge, skills, and abilities of those who have been at an institution for a while and can draw on a diverse range of experiences. Some may see this approach as weak leadership and disempowering, but it is in fact a compelling way to empower those around you and establish a framework for cooperation and transparency in your leadership style.

This paper examines the unique challenges of young leaders and provides a framework for success in their positions. The old adage that you never get a second

chance to make a first impression holds true, and one must invest in the right areas in order to win the support of others and help move a department forward. In order to accomplish this goal, it is our belief that young leaders, in particular, need to focus on four basic approaches to increase the likelihood of success: relationship building, servant leadership, mentoring opportunities, and finding ways to participate in and support others in professional development.



Concept One: Relationship Building as a Means of Currency!

People are everything in this business! An individual’s legacy in an educational organization is not how quickly they complete a task; rather, it is how they engage others in relationships. The relationships you build with your

You should know your people better than anyone else in the organization.

team members are pivotal to fostering success in your area and strengthening the commitment that they have to the department's mission and their motivation to accomplish the associated tasks. Knowing how to build positive, working relationships is an important skill and one that is not necessarily easily acquired. Nonetheless, it is important to focus on building these connections.

At some point, your mother may have told you something like, "Trust is one of the hardest things to get back once it is lost." As a young leader, your currency is trust. Trust comes from building good relationships. However, getting there is not an easy path to navigate. In the book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Lencioni (2002, p. 97) illustrates a pyramid much like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The difference is that his pyramid addresses the needs of teams instead of basic human needs. Maslow says that our most basic needs for human survival are food and shelter. In a parallel image, Lencioni says that the most basic underpinning of any team is Trust. Trust in a team environment is akin to food and shelter for survival. Lencioni's main point is that an absence of trust lays the groundwork for a dysfunctional team.

Much of good leadership theory talks about the leader-member-exchange and how there is a positive correlation between these two entities. Trust is foundational to this concept. It matters how the leader relates to the follower, as well as the nature of the relationship between the two of them. Having a good relationship with your colleagues will result in your ability to engage them in such a way that produces the best results for your organization. You should know your people better than anyone else in the organization. If you focus on relationship building, you will understand what is important to them and what motivates them, you'll understand what they don't like and what demotivates

them, and you'll discover what is going on in their personal and work lives so that you can lead more effectively. The boundaries to trust and relationship building are not limited to just your department, but extends to all areas of the organization. However, relationship building should start with people in your area of responsibility. The better you know them, the better you are able to serve your staff, which leads us to our second concept.

Concept Two: Servant Leadership

Leading in your thirties is much different than leading in your fifties. There is a good chance that many of the employees know how their jobs should be done better than you do. In many cases, they may have been doing their current jobs when you were still in grade school. Overcoming this gap of life and institutional experience can be challenging. Beginning to understand how to interact with the employees in your department, as well as others in the institution is a key component to moving objectives forward in a strategic way. The need arises for a leadership style that is compatible with the existing schema of the department.

Servant Leadership, while not a new concept, has great appropriateness in this situation. It was a leadership style that both of our mentors suggested we adopt right at the beginning of our appointments. Taking this approach seems to have proven effective, because in many ways it reflects the tenor of what we've done. Young leaders are not able to fall back on a legacy or a list of successful projects. Their track record is short and their selection was due more to their promise as a leader, and we would guess that it was seldom ever due to an authoritarian leadership style. This is an important distinction. As someone who is young moves into a new leadership position, there seems to be an instinctive need to be more authoritarian. This temptation must be resisted,

as we see an authoritarian style counteracting the other three concepts we are putting forth.

Greenleaf (2010) in *The Servant as Leader*, an essay that he first published in 1970, coined the phrase “Servant Leadership.” In that essay, he said:

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.”

Another quote from Greenleaf states, “The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”

Knowing how to put Servant Leadership into practice can be hard sometimes. Here are a few examples to develop our understanding of how to enact this style. Always be willing to roll up your sleeves and do the work, even if the work is seen as “below” the position you hold. Exhibit caring for your faculty as people who are important to you. Take the time to understand what is going on in both their work and personal lives in order to support them from a “whole person” perspective. It seems that when employees are off track, it is often due to circumstances external to work. Servant Leadership should not be seen as weak or undermining. This is a common myth worth dispelling. Instead, it should be viewed as bringing out the best in others.

Concept Three: Value of Mentoring Relationships

In addition to relationship building and servant leadership, it is critical for young leaders to value and utilize good mentors. Good mentors are invaluable when it comes to minimizing mistakes and giving background and perspective. As noted earlier, young leaders are often great at task completion, but their people skills may need a bit of work. They do not have the relational breadth of experience to always make the right choices when handling people issues. Mentors provide a safe place to

be transparent and vulnerable, where it is safe to say that you are not sure how to proceed.

Johnson and Ridley (2008, p. xi), in their recent book entitled *The Elements of Mentoring* wrote,

Mentoring relationships (mentorships) are dynamic, reciprocal, personal relationships in which a more experienced person (mentor) acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced person (protégé). Mentors provide protégés with knowledge, advice, counsel, support, and opportunity in the protégé’s pursuit of full membership in a particular profession.

The authors go on to say that, “Outstanding mentors are intentional about the mentor role.”

One benefit of having a mentor is that you can draw on and learn from their past experiences and possibly avoid having to learn a lesson the hard way. You can use your mentoring relationship to avoid early mistakes that would destroy your reputation and your ability to be an effective leader. Another component of mentoring is that it prevents you from approaching situations blindly and provides at least another example of how you might go about doing something. The greatest assets of having a mentor is helping young leaders minimize their mistakes and giving wise counsel. The following list comes from Finzel’s (1994) book, *The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make*, and provides some examples:



1. The top-down attitude
2. Putting paperwork before people work
3. The absence of affirmation
4. No room for Mavericks?
5. Dictatorship in decision-making
6. Dirty delegation
7. Communication chaos
8. Missing the clues of corporate culture
9. Success without successors
10. Failure to focus on the future



Your supervisor can be your mentor. If your mentor and supervisor are one and the same, you need to be careful that you have the right kind of relationship. It works well when there is a significant age gap, and there are no organizational threats. Again the relationship matters greatly, and it does not work in all cases.

In addition, it is important to recognize the importance of having a colleague that is very much in the same position as you are. To be able to talk with someone openly who faces the same situations as you, really provides a new facet of insight and creates a safe zone for sharing your thoughts and perspectives. There are certain considerations to make when you are new and doing this for the first time — a peer-mentor can help you assess that risk consideration.

Concept Four: Value of Professional Development

Academics can occasionally have the attitude that their learning stops with their last degree. Taking the time

to invest in yourself can be one of the more important things that you do, especially if you are in leadership. Many stakeholders benefit from you being more efficient — meaning your organization, your employees, and you. In the business that we operate within, we can find many instances of managers who lack proper training. Academic institutions are notorious for promoting longevity rather than competency. This can be problematic on many levels. We need those in leadership to have the right training if they are to interact with others, manage others, lead others, and increase the structural integrity of the organization. It is necessary that young leaders learn these skills early and from a credible organization.

So much research and wisdom exists already in training programs, books, seminars, and the like. It seems essential to begin to examine a lot of this work, assess it for validity and appropriateness, and determine whether or how to incorporate it into your leadership knowledge base. The Chair Academy has been a tremendous benefit in this respect, providing an opportunity to learn about accepted theories and research. Assuming more of a longitudinal approach, the Chair Academy allows new leaders and managers to receive training that will help them be more effective in their organizations and with others, and to experience this change in a way that will really stick. Rather than go to a one-day seminar, the Chair Academy tracks this progress over eighteen months, helps you establish a formal development plan, a mentoring relationship, and a formal and informal network of other working professionals who can provide insight.

Informally, professional development needs to be regularly occurring. We encourage you to approach this process with the idea of continual renewal and reflective practice — keep doing it and never stop. This can informally occur through reading and studying on your own, taking time to examine yourself and planning for your future, developing those mentoring relationships, and asking others for feedback on how you are doing. A strong relationship can be invaluable to personal development.

Consider asking your employees with whom you have a strong relationship, “What do I need to hear that no one is telling me?” This feedback will allow you to change your behavior or adjust an approach before it becomes damaging. Don’t be afraid to hear this feedback and make a change. The informal process can be just as important as the formal one since this is what happens in the day-to-day. If integrated properly, it can naturally become a part of whom you are while modeling openness and a willingness to change to your staff. Using this approach, you can develop your leadership skills greatly over time.


One technique that can be used is to ask your staff and reports to evaluate you each year. Establish a survey and mechanism where you can get feedback anonymously on how you are doing, where the department needs to be heading, and what needs to change. This honest, open discussion is what you really want. It can be painful, and sometimes hard to swallow, but the truth is the truth. Even if it is not the truth and only a perception, the perception becomes the truth if it is not confronted in a meaningful way. You want to know how things really are or how things are perceived. Don’t be defensive, but use the feedback as a way to establish a path for departmental change that employees will own. Embrace what change can mean for you, your people, and your organization.

Conclusion

Being a leader and manager is hard work. The early days for a Chair/Dean or any other leadership position are especially hard because you need to be so many things to so many people. People are watching and forming early opinions. You need to get off to a good start, as recovering from early mistakes can be difficult.

As you go about your work, the relationships that are constantly being formed should be examined and not treated frivolously. Care should be taken to establish a good foundation with those around you. Subsequently, one should work to engage in Servant Leadership, find a mentor, and make the necessary investments to develop professionally both yourself, as well as those around you.

Your work is truly done through others. The goal is to develop a department/school that has a positive direction, all while working diligently to help students succeed.

It is important to establish a framework for how you will deal with the human side of this job because so many of the day-to-day interruptions and challenges will draw your attention. If you want change to happen, it must be practiced and internalized, so that it is a part of what you do. Because you hope to be with an organization for a long time, possibly move up in the organization, and be successful in your position, you have to create a sustainable model for your leadership — a model that will persist and benefit others. 

Works Cited

- Collins, J. (2001). *From good to great*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Finzel, H. (1994). *The top ten mistakes leaders make*. Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications.
- Johnson, B. W. & Ridley, C. R. (2008). *The elements of mentoring*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lencioni, P. (2002). *The five dysfunctions of a team*. New Jersey: Jossey-Bass.
- What is servant leadership?* (n.d.). Retrieved from January 29, 2010, from Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership website: <http://www.greenleaf.org/whatis/>



Dr. Michael Rivera is from Ivy Tech Community College (USA) where he is the Dean of the School of Business. Michael can be reached at: mrivera@ivytech.edu.

Dr. Jason Dewling is from Lakeland College, Alberta (Canada) where he is the Associate Dean of Arts, Science, Business and Academic Services. Jason can be reached at: Jason.Dewling@lakelandcollege.ca.

As new leaders, both are passionate about working with other new leaders in helping them be successful in their new positions. Michael and Jason are using their personal experiences to foster several research trajectories. They will be continuing their work in this area with a recently funded grant research project from the Alberta Rural Development Network.