Chapter 9

A Discussion of Critical Leadership Issues in Higher Education

Chunxue V. Wang
Florida Atlantic University, USA

Jim I. Berger
Western Kentucky University, USA

ABSTRACT

The authors seek to illustrate that gaps exist between leadership theory and practice. Well-reasoned theories are disseminated in various academic venues; however, they are hardly applied in practice. In higher education, these gaps seem to be compounded by the administrator’s lack of technical skills or leadership ethics. To demonstrate the true gaps between leadership theories and practice, the authors provide a real world example. While different leadership theories are briefly reviewed, the authors’ intention was to show that they need to be applied to practice in order for leaders to be effective. Closing the gaps between leadership theories and practice may take many years and much effort. By reading this chapter, the authors hope readers/researchers will clearly see the gaps that exist in higher education and work to find ways to plug those gaps.

INTRODUCTION

Read any current job description for an administrative (leadership) position at an institution of higher learning, and it probably lists the following leader characteristics:

1. visionary and able to take the university or program to a new level.
2. committed to shared governance.
3. possess conceptual, human, and technical skills.
4. have an excellent record of teaching, scholarship and service.
5. committed to doing the right things and doing things right.
The list may go on and on. In addition to searching for leaders who possess leadership skills, institutions of higher learning are particularly interested in those individuals who have demonstrated skills in teaching, research, and service. This is understandable because according to Taylor’s (1911) principles of scientific management (as cited in Wang, 2011), leaders, whether they are hired as department chairs, college deans, university provosts, or presidents, first of all, must know the field. In order to know the field, these “would be” leaders must have practiced in a certain field for quite a few years before they can be “labeled” as experts. Without being experts in their own fields, these leaders will not be in a position to carry out Taylor’s principles of scientific management. Principles of scientific management are useful and helpful to leaders as leaders are looking for the one best method to lead followers. Leaders want followers to be highly productive in a certain field. As stated in the principles of scientific management (Taylor, 1911), leaders, like managers, should focus on one best method to use with their followers.

Then, the question comes to mind, “How can leaders look for the best method?” Institutions of higher learning have set the standards. In other words, leaders must be excellent in their teaching, research, and professional service. Without modeling the teaching, research and scholarship expectations for their followers, there is no way leaders can evaluate followers’ performance and find the one best method (based on principles of scientific management; of course leaders may use multiple methods) to help followers to be productive in the field. Common sense tells us, “The more leaders know their followers, the better they can help followers identify that one best method to be productive in the field.” Thousands of years ago, in order to pass on a certain trade, fathers had to be experts first (Roberts, 1965; Wang & King, 2008; Wang & King, 2009). Otherwise, children could not learn a trade from their fathers.

To this day, leaders are still learning to be leaders by “trial and error” although there are all kinds of leadership training academies. Leaders in higher education are not born to be leaders and usually do not have a higher degree in leadership, just a degree in their content field. Most of them work first as faculty members. After a certain number of years, they become excellent faculty members in teaching and scholarship. Then these faculty members look for leadership positions. Some are chosen based on their excellent teaching and scholarship and they may possess traits of an effective leader.

Others, however, are chosen because of their connections with leaders, or based upon their seniority, irrespective of their former teaching, research or desired leadership skills. In higher education, these installed leaders are labeled as “puppet” administrators, which means they will do anything if their superiors tell them what to do. These administrators are viewed as “team players” by their supervisors, and they are being actively promoted according to their ranks. Those who oppose such direction are labeled as “loose cannons”, therefore, must be removed from institutions of higher learning. It is not rare that highly qualified professors, even tenured professors, are laid off from university settings. Team players, together with the help of their supervisors, can remove anyone they consider a potential threat to their “leadership.” In fact, there is even literature about the aforementioned fact of removing qualified faculty from universities. In the literature, it is called “academic mobbing” (Friedenberg, 2006). Certain leaders with the power invested in them may choose to gang up on others who oppose their wrong doings. It is not pleasant to use the term, “gang up on”, but this is the reality in many university settings. It is this “gang up on” people that has intensified the so called “leadership gap” in higher education.

Numerous books and articles have been written on leadership. However, very few articles touch on closing this leadership gap between theory and