

The One Issue That's Bigger than the Demographic Cliff

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At a workshop I ran recently, I asked the participants to answer the question, “What’s one thing I know about leadership?” when they were introducing themselves. One of the participants, a brilliant researcher who directs *three* different centers, stated very plainly: “In higher education, you are always promoted into a job for which you have no training.” His comment wasn’t delivered with any cynicism—he was at the training voluntarily for precisely that reason. He wanted to learn more about leadership.

Over the last three years, I’ve worked with more than 75 groups on various college campuses at all levels—from Chairs, all the way up to Presidents and their senior teams. And I find that this exact same phenomenon exists at every single level. There are only two differences: The higher up in the institution, the less likely leaders are to admit that they need help; and the consequences of ineffective leadership are exponentially greater—even greater than the demographic cliff.

Higher education is unique in this way—most other people-driven businesses invest heavily in leadership. Higher ed, instead, has been slow to see the value. Instead, we prefer to prioritize a narrow definition of success—with high-impact publications, grant development, starting new programs, raising major gifts, and similar.

Almost all higher ed leaders (even at the highest levels) continue to invest time staying current in their discipline or profession. But ask them whether they invest a single hour each week to invest in their leadership, and the blank stare they return tells you everything you need to know.

A lack of leadership impacts teams, divisions, and entire campuses in pernicious ways. Five of the most common examples of poor leadership that I see:

1. **Decision making is focused on making people happy, rather than acceptance of the outcome.** Leaders who lack training often don't understand their role in decision making—that it's not to make people happy with the decision, especially if the decision is high stakes. Their job is rather to make sure that the process is fair, inclusive, and transparent—and that they follow through on an effort once they begin rather than abandoning it in the face of pushback or dissent. If the decision-making process you run is truly fair, people are more likely to accept the outcome even if they aren't happy about it.
2. **They ignore the 20-60-20 rule.** In any given team or division, usually 20% of the people come to work constructive, optimistic, and ready to work hard. These are your “top 20%.” Similarly, you also have a “bottom 20%.” These are people who, over time, have become cynical and would rather tear ideas and people down than offer a constructive view.
Most leaders ignore the top 20% (taking them for granted) and instead spend 80% of their time and mental and emotional energy trying to convince the bottom 20% to get on board. The hard realization is that most of these people (not *all*, but most) will never get on board no matter how much time is invested. Leaders would therefore be better served focusing on the top 20% and aligning the “middle 60%” with them. A leader's most precious resource is their time and attention, and without leadership training, it's often not used effectively.
3. **They think they have to have all the answers.** Not only do they put inordinate and unrealistic pressure on themselves to single-handedly solve tough issues, they also hold issues at the senior-most level before they respond or address them with their broader teams, divisions, and campuses. Leadership can be lonely even in the best of times—let alone when there are high-stakes decisions on the table. Effective training can help leaders to learn how to engage others in meaningful conversation about emergent issues, tap into the collective wisdom of the group, and address issues in a more collaborative way. Ambiguity and complexity are never easy to deal with, but there are proven strategies that leaders can learn, and—given the rate of change in higher education—that they must learn quickly.
4. **They don't use their meeting time well.** In fact, some leaders think meetings are a waste of time and think they're doing their team a favor by “giving them back time” when they cancel a meeting. But meetings are where collaboration happens—where new ideas are hatched, decisions are made, and alignment is achieved. Running effective meetings is a critical skill to teach leaders, yet most leaders don't know how to leverage their team's time when they convene. Meetings are often just information sessions, and when discussions occur, they

are run as an open forum, which means that a small handful of voices dominate the conversation. If these voices are negative, the constructive voices in the room withdraw and not only does the leader miss out on critical input, the overall climate in the room becomes negative. Leaders need to learn how to manage dissenting voices, how to draw in quieter ones without putting them on the spot and how to ensure their meetings become spaces for creativity, momentum and strengthening relationships.

5. **They focus on the symptoms, not the underlying problems.** Whether because they are overwhelmed by their expectations, or because they are spread too thin, a lot of leaders find themselves in reactive mode, fighting whatever fire has just been put in front of them. They rarely take the time (believing they don't have it) to more deeply understand the issue. Slowing down may seem counterintuitive, but it is often necessary to ensure that you're addressing the right thing. There are a number of strategies leaders can learn to diagnose problems at the root level, and to examine how their underlying assumptions and mental models may actually be contributing to the challenges they are experiencing. This process often reveals novel solutions, frees up capacity, and enables leaders to approach their work in very different ways—all critical needs for confronting the challenges we are facing.

One only has to look at the list of recent institutional closures. While external factors like the demographic cliff are most often cited as the reasons, the reality is that failed leadership is the biggest culprit.

These institutions did not fail overnight. Countless leaders waited to take meaningful action until it was too late, tried to solve the issues themselves (focusing on “protecting” their faculty/staff from the challenges rather than engaging them as partners), missed and misread signals, and tried to preserve people's feelings over making hard but necessary decisions. These are all tragic yet preventable failures of leadership.

In my more than 20 years of experience in higher education, I have unfortunately seen more examples of bad leadership than of good leadership. But in almost all cases, I do see well-intentioned leaders—leaders who are doing the best they can with the training and support they have. It's time that we started setting ourselves up for greater success by investing in the skill development needed for confronting an increasingly ambiguous and complex environment. If we take the time to do so, success can follow.

Academic Impressions offers a wide range of workshops, resources and coaching to hone your leadership and strengthen your institution's leadership bench. We can provide a turn-key solution, customizing and delivering a leadership program for your campus or we can partner with internal stakeholders to build their capacity so, over time, programs can move in-house. If you are interested in learning more, please [contact me](#).