

## “Leadership for a World in Flux”

Henry M. Jackson Foundation/William Van Ness Lecture on Leadership

According to cognitive psychologist and Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Daniel Kahneman, it’s troubling to think of “an organism equipped with an affective and hormonal system not much different from that of the jungle rat being given the ability to destroy every living thing by pushing a few buttons.”

(and, no he didn’t say that recently, this is from 1974).

Although the stakes aren’t always so high, leadership matters. As such, so does leadership development. This is especially so during times like these:

- The most contentious election in years, Brexit, Aleppo, Mosul, terrorism, drought, climate change... oh my!
- Even many areas of progress raise concerns -- Artificial Intelligence, cloning, robotics, one day we’ll all be bionic?

The only thing certain about the future is that it will be different from the past and hard to predict.

So how do we encourage leadership? – whether with a Big L from those leading important entities in our society or, as significant, with a small L – in all of us as collective contributors to meaningful progress.

Today, I’m going to briefly review some theories and research on leadership and put in the context of university leadership, the area I know the most about. Then I’ll talk about some exciting work we are doing here, at the University of Washington, to prepare our students to enter a wide array of leadership positions and to practice leadership in whatever position they have.

### Theories of Leadership

Great leaders and their leadership have been a focus of human interest since the beginning of recorded history. Our earliest writings are myths and tales of hero leaders and their legendary deeds. So, it should not be too surprising that the first academic research on leadership sought to identify the “traits” of great leaders and what distinguished them from followers. The work, mostly conducted in the aftermath of WWII, focused on traits such as dominance and extraversion. Makes sense, given that it was a time of iconic “strong man” leaders like Patton and Churchill or even Hitler and Mussolini. But despite hundreds of studies, in a wide range of organizations, they failed to find any consistent pattern of traits that separated those in leadership positions from those defined as followers.

The next phase of research focused less on the character traits or personality of leaders, and more on their behavior – the “how” of leadership. This work, for example, contrasted a more “authoritarian” or top-down style of leadership to a more “democratic” or collaborative style. But once, again studies examining how leadership style affected their subordinate’s productivity or morale failed to find a consistent pattern.

These early theories and research did provide us with valuable insights, especially the work on leadership style, with its focus on behaviors that can be learned. But, the assumption underlying this work – that there is one best way to be a leader, or to lead, regardless of the task or circumstances, proved to be their fateful flaw. Subsequent work has taken a more holistic approach looking more at what I would call the practice of leadership, which, I’ll argue later, is the way to approach leadership development.

Two of these more holistic theories, both “coincidentally” developed, in large part, by faculty members at the UW, are especially appealing to me, because they fit with my experience and practice of leadership over the course of my career.

The first is the “contingency” theory of leadership, set forth by Fred Fiedler, a Professor of Psychology – we were in the same department as my career was beginning and his ending. He focused on leadership style, and how it interacts with the context or situation. Does the leader have weak or strong power over the team? Are they coming in with trust established or viewed with suspicion? Are things in the organization fairly stable or in flux?

The nature of these and a host of other factors and conditions determine which leadership style or leader will be more effective.

The “strong man” style that worked best for generals, or political leaders during war time, for example, might not work during times of peace. And, that style of leadership certainly wouldn’t work for a university president or dean, regardless of war or peace.

Academic leadership presents some challenges that are fairly unique. Universities, like the UW, operate under a model of shared governance – not only between their board and administration, but also between the administration, the faculty, and more and more, the students as well. A university president can’t rule by fiat, or coercion, or by a cult of personality – in academia, successful leadership depends on the ability to garner willing buy-in from various constituencies. As such, a more democratic or collaborative style is not only more effective, but necessary.

And, unlike most other institutions where positions of leadership are viewed as desirable, something to aspire to, faculty refer to engaging in administration as moving over to the “dark side.”

As such, relationship building is often the first task of a new academic leader, especially one who is coming from the outside. “Listening tours” are quite common in the first few months

while an executive staff (that may well have outlasted several presidents), keeps the trains running.

In many ways, academic leadership reminds me of how David Brooks talked about government. *“Craftsmanship in government is not like craftsmanship in business. You can’t win people with money and you can’t order people around. Governance requires enormous patience, a capacity to tolerate boredom and the skill of quiet herding. Frustrations abound. When it is done well, as a friend of mine in government puts it, each individual day sucks but the overall experience is tremendously rewarding.”*

I consider myself REALLY lucky because while I do have a fairly collaborative approach, I’m not all that patient. Ironic given that I’m a psychologist, but too much process makes me crazy. Yet as a long-term member of the university community, working with another long-term member of the faculty as Provost (we have about 70 years here between us), we’ve been able to immediately get to work on things, launching some campus wide initiatives and undertaking the largest administrative re-organization in decades.

There’s no question that in order to do so, we’ve traded on a built up reservoir of good will. As insiders we also had a pretty good sense of what needed to be done, so we’ve been able to act more quickly than is typically the case. Although those in the business world, where governance is not “joint” may still find it too slow.

There IS room for some top down work, IF built on a collaborative platform. For example, we launched an initiative on Population Health with the goal of heralding our university resources, and partnerships with other community entities, to improve health, broadly defined, both locally and globally. It’s a presidential initiative and the decision to focus on this area was mine. But, the initiative draws upon university strengths that were almost universally recognized and it will be carried forth in close consultation with a task force with broad representation across campus.

I’ve also introduced a presidential executive order related to faculty-student relationships that represent a conflict of interest. Although I am seeking input, and will consider “tweaks” to the order, I made it 100% clear at faculty senate that the need for an order was not open for negotiation. I have no doubt that it would be passed if put up to a vote, but we just can’t afford the months of process that would be necessary to craft then vote upon a resolution.

Being able to diagnose the context or situation is critical to making decisions about when you need buy-in up front, when you can bypass it up front, but build it into next steps, or in rare instances, act unilaterally during a crisis or when something is represents a non-negotiable core value. Having made the situational diagnosis, you can match your leadership behaviors to what’s required.

But, to do this well, you not only need to know how to diagnose a situation, you also need to be able to diagnose yourself. Bruce Avolio, who holds the Mark Pigott chair in Business Strategic Leadership here at the Foster School of Business, has been a key contributor to, and proponent of, the theory of “authentic leadership.” He places the concept of self-awareness at its heart. According to him, authentic leaders must be “deeply aware of how they think, behave, and are perceived by others, as well as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths.”

This really rings true to me. I was trained as a clinical psychologist, and earlier in my career was a licensed psychotherapist and even served as Director of the UW’s Clinical Psychology Training program, consistently rated among the top three in the country. As a clinical supervisor, I’d tell my students – to do a good job, a surgeon needs to have intimate knowledge of and learn how to use a scalpel. As a therapist, “you” are your own tool, and you need to learn how to use “it”. You do that by watching your videotaped therapy sessions with clients and discussing them with a supervisor to better learn how your mannerisms, body language, idiomatic expressions, and even your voice and intonation affect your communications and how those are experienced by others. Painful as it might be, and for me it WAS painful, I’d recommend that any leader spend some time watching themselves on film with someone else critiquing their performance; it’s both humbling and instructive.

In my job as a leader, especially in this new position where the scrutiny seems never-ending, I find myself falling back on what I learned about myself from this training. I know that I come across much more strongly than I feel – I’m actually the most low-key member of my family – but Cuban Miami is very different from the Seattle with its Scandinavian heritage. If I really want to hear someone’s opinion, I need to tone down my own and proactively ask for a critique. On the other hand, once a decision is made, my passion can work for me in rallying the troops.

I also know that the best way for me to tamp down on my impulse to speak, when I should be listening, is to literally sit on my hands. (Joke: How do you get a Cuban to shut up? Handcuff them).

Self-monitoring is essential to a job where you are constantly with people in high stakes situations. People look to you to see how they should react. If you look panicked when you talk about budget cuts or potential policy changes, others will panic right along with you. If you appear calm and confident, others are more apt to stay grounded and join you in problem-solving mode. As a leader, your behavior sets the tone.

Self-reflection is also how leaders establish their values, and strong values are the foundation of capable leadership. The middle of a crisis is not the time to be figuring out what you REALLY believe is important.

A big bonus to authentic leadership is that it produces authentic followers (or in the case of academia, collaborators) – people who share the values of their leader and are willing to work hard to achieve them. Taken together, authentic leadership and followership creates a powerful force for action where people are motivated by deeply-held shared principles. For a university, a highly values-driven organization, “authentic leadership” offers a good model for successful governance and it provides the scaffolding for effective action.

Theories and research on leadership CAN be very helpful in honing your leadership skills. But, they don’t provide a formula for how to do leadership right. We should each do that in ways that are very individual and that reflect our own personal style. In my experience those people who end up trying to figure out the formula to being “authentic” or acting “like a leader” often end up becoming alienated from themselves, and eventually they alienate others. This is an especially dangerous pitfall for women, people of color, or others that, in this country, are not leaders perceived to be “out of central casting.” (I’ll be glad to talk more about that in the Q&A.)

That doesn’t mean that leadership can’t be nurtured and developed. There’s a distinction between being a leader and practicing leadership. A leader, to some degree, is invested with authority as a result of their title and position in an organization. Practicing leadership is something that anyone can do, regardless of position or title. Like playing the piano or writing code, some people will have more aptitude than others, but skills like self-awareness, impulse control, and situational analysis, amongst a host of other skills and behaviors, can be learned through experience, practice and reflection.

As an educator in a public university, something I’m especially interested in is how we can develop the leadership skills the next generation will need. Our worlds’ big challenges aren’t going away and we urgently need people who are prepared to lead through them. We have both the responsibility and the opportunity to equip our students with these skills that will also be essential to success in the working world.

Not only do Fortune 500 companies reference leadership as the most important quality they are looking for in their college hires, so do non-profits, government and just about any other work setting. Yet 96 percent of employers say recent college graduates are significantly unprepared to lead.

### **How universities can cultivate leaders**

Leadership, like other forms of privilege, is often handed down from generation to generation. For kids who grow up being encouraged and expected to run for student government or be presidents of a high school club or captain of a team, the notion of being a leader may seem natural, and this reinforces the perception that leaders look and sound a certain way. But for many students who arrive at the University of Washington, where about 30% of our students are the first in their families to attend university, the concept of leadership and aspirations to it, at least in a formal sense, are still untapped.

About 5 years ago, when I was Provost, we launched the Husky Leadership Initiative or HLI, to expand and deepen student leadership education, making it more accessible, explicit and comprehensive – to decouple the idea of leadership from title or position, and to make the students the co-creators of their own experience. The Husky Leadership Initiative is grounded in the belief that everyone can learn the skills needed to lead oneself, a team, or an organization.

The HLI has worked to involve as many of our students as possible, with special emphasis on our incoming first years and on integrating it into the curriculum more generally. Leadership skills – like being a facilitator, using critical thinking, creating change, and being resilient and adaptable – are aspects of learning that can be part of almost any class. Making those tacit leadership learning experiences explicit– when they make class presentations, engage in class projects, or choose the topic for a term paper, as few for examples, by having students consciously reflect on them can build leadership skills.

There is one-size-fits-all approach to this initiative. They offer a broad range of programming from lectures by community leaders and fireside chats to trainings and workshops. They even offer a Husky Leadership Certificate program for juniors and seniors.

The certificate program has been an especially effective tool for leadership development. Even if some students may come to it in an attempt to simply burnish their resumes with the “leadership” stamp, they come away with something real. It combines self-reflection and mentorship to help students deepen their understanding of their leadership experiences and potential. The students who participate report an increase in their confidence, their ability to act with intention, to articulate their values and to more effectively plan for a career. And, our students are responding, 18 signed up for the certificate program their first year, and this year 160 have signed up. This is on top of the thousand or so students that participated in leadership workshop, program or retreat.

Drawing upon the lessons already learned there, last year I taught a freshman seminar titled “Learning to Lead.” I co-taught the class with Chelsa Ayers, who was a “graduate” of the HLI and had become one of its leaders. Ironically, or not, Chelsa had just lost a close election for the Vice President of the Seattle campus student government, but that experience didn’t diminish her leadership talents, in fact, it strengthened them. And, it certainly didn’t dampen her enthusiasm for working with others to develop their leadership.

The method of instruction was multi-modal, including lectures, group discussions, and team work. Students also took self-assessment questionnaires about their communication and leadership styles and reflected on identifying their core values. At the end of the quarter, we asked each student to articulate his or her personal leadership philosophy and what they learned from the class.

I was impressed by what some of these young people came up with.

One student wrote, “I believe pursuing a meaningful goal creates passion, growth and drive. Focus, logic, accuracy and empathy guide my leadership, empowering me to better myself and any project I work on. I lead by having a clear vision, concrete rules and strong motivation in order to bring driven, capable people together to create the best possible solution to a given problem.

And another wrote, “Leading from the margins means that you're not the boss. You're not the head honcho. You're not the big guy upstairs. However, you still take charge of your responsibilities and complete the task at hand no matter how small it is. Leading from the margins is not for recognition; leading from the margins is what reflects your character.”

Or as another said quite succinctly but to the point “through experiences with mentors I’ve learned that leadership is about doing, not just talking. My leadership philosophy is one of action and follow through.”

And I saw that quite directly in some of the decisions students were making – to put themselves out there more, to stand up for their values when the situation required, to not think about themselves not as green behind the ears “freshmen,” but as privileged members of an educational elite with a responsibility to give back and LEAD.

That’s why I have a lot of faith that introducing young people to practicing and consciously reflecting on leadership skills is fundamental to helping them become people who can and WILL effect transformational change. At the UW we talk about providing students with a degree PLUS. And leadership is most definitely one of those pluses

## Closing

I once thought of myself as an accidental administrator, because, even well into my academic career, I didn’t think formal academic leadership was for me. In fact, the first time I threw my hat in the ring for a deanship I wasn’t just not selected, but told by the President at the time that I was not temperamentally cut out for administrative leadership; I wasn’t skilled enough at the art of compromise, nor did I have the prudence necessary to be a spokesman (and I do think he said spokesMAN) for a large, complex organization.

So, leading from the margins, where there is more freedom to take what he described as “bold” stands, seemed to suit me better. But, as is often the case, life took me in a different direction. But, I’m finding that my tendency to be direct does not detract from my ability to find middle ground when needed and that we are living in times where boldness is not only called for, but necessary.

Indeed, I have found that the lessons I had learned through life experience and in previous positions, have served me well. It’s best to talk directly, and with a minimum of what I call “administrateez.” One should work hard to build consensus, but not let the need for unanimous agreement lead to paralysis. One must examine problems and issues from the perspectives of

the various parties involved, gathering data and insights from multiple sources to inform decision-making. One cannot shrink from difficult decisions, but it's always best to anticipate and plan for the blowback. The job of an academic leader is to be strategic and to forge a clear sense of direction for the unit, but it is equally important for him or her to inspire, listen to, and support the vision and efforts of others. Indeed, the biggest satisfaction in my job comes in the form of reflected glory. It is all about taking pleasure in the success of others and knowing that their success is yours. I've approached my new position not with the notion that I need to learn "how to be a president," but as an opportunity to take my leadership skills to another level in service of a place I love and a mission I hold dear.

Whether they've held "official" leadership positions or not, our students also arrive on this campus with a lot of talent and a tremendous amount of life experience. Through our holistic admissions process we seek not just students with the highest GPA's and test scores, but those who have succeeded while overcoming hardships, who have engaged in a wide range of extracurricular and community activities, who have demonstrated self-awareness in their admissions essays. The Husky Leadership Initiative works with students to get them to recognize the considerably well-developed habits of mind, values, and skills that our students bring with them when they arrive and then build on them, taking them to a new level in the service of values and a mission that will inspire them.

Preparing as many people as possible with the skills to lead – lead themselves, lead their communities, to lead through crisis and to lead change will make our whole society stronger and, with a little luck, produce the kind of leaders our country and our world needs – now more than ever.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.