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Doing the Right Thing - The 5 C's of Leadership in Higher Education

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The 5 C's of Leadership in Higher Education



We have received substantial evidence recently that the Ivory Tower is not immune to the disoriented values that sickened our economy and caused people to want to challenge the wisdom of Wall Street. Although within higher education the infection has different symptoms and is not as widespread, we are still left wondering what happened to some of the people entrusted with institutional leadership and the care and well-being of the students we serve.

In higher education the disease seems to be incubated in a culture motivated by athletic victories or institutional rankings, rather than individual greed. But still, we see leadership decisions that reflect a greater concern for institutional brand than for institutional effectiveness, and a greater concern for institutional advancement than for advancement of the greater good.

Earlier in my career, when I was the faculty director of the Center for Leadership Development and the Leadership Communication program at the University of West Florida, I often talked about the “Four C’s of Leadership”: Competence, Confidence, Character, and Commitment. And for some time I continued to use that four-point schema in my classes and professional presentations. After about nine years as a CAO, however, I have learned that the most transformative academic leaders are those who also display a fifth “C” — Courage.

As we continue to seek strong leadership for institutions in all sectors of higher education, I believe we should seek people who exemplify these “Five C’s of Leadership”:

1. Competence

Strong academic leadership requires communicating appropriately and effectively in interpersonal, group, and public contexts. Strong leaders are capable of using their communication skills to manage their impression on others, develop relationships, show emotion wisely, establish credibility, and influence and inspire others. They also exhibit honesty, in steering clear of obfuscation and deception.

Academic leaders must use communication competencies to establish the appropriate balance between credibility and approachability across different situations. This requires the ability to use directive behaviors that show a concern for outcomes and supportive behaviors that reflect a concern for people and help university community members feel comfortable about themselves, their colleagues, and the situations in which they work.

2. Confidence

Strong academic leaders are self-confident and inspire others to have confidence in them.

They arduously develop subject matter expertise and continually invest in their own learning.

Strong leaders know what they don't know and surround themselves with people who can bring diverse viewpoints and expertise to the organization. Although they gently, but forthrightly, share guidance up, down, and across the organizational chart, strong leaders demonstrate sincere confidence in others and support decisions made in collaboration.

3. Character

Strong academic leaders inspire others to trust them. This aspect of a leader's character is the one most likely to translate into their long-term effectiveness.

Strong academic leaders accept accountability for results and demonstrate principled decision-making.

Strong leaders say what they mean and mean what they say. They collaborate with others to establish shared goals, priorities, and standards and then use those to guide decision-making and resource allocation. They do not play favorites or allocate resources to keep critics at bay.

4. Commitment

Strong academic leaders always work toward the goal of advancing the university's educational mission, rather than promoting personal gain or institutional brand at the expense of mission.

Strong leaders seek to serve others, rather than to have power over them. They develop a deep and strong leadership team, decentralize authority, and empower others to provide leadership within their areas of expertise.

Strong leaders are committed to organizational goals and the goals of the individuals who work with them to serve the organization. They conduct their work in a way that simultaneously facilitates organizational development and individual development, including their own.

Strong leaders "encourage the heart," look for ways to "catch people doing something right," and refrain from publicly demoralizing others. They see to it that each individual in the organization has an individual development plan that advances their goals, as well as the organizational goals.

Strong leaders are committed to high quality, which requires continuous process improvement and the ability to take the long view. They keep the long-term perspective in sharp focus and do not let short-term pressures derail the organization and its members.

5. Courage

Strong academic leaders have the courage to move through traditional roadblocks in order to advocate for and inspire the highest level of academic quality possible, within institutional constraints.

Strong leaders have the courage to operate in the “sunshine,” to be truly collaborative, to seek honest feedback, and to change course when appropriate.

Strong leaders stand tall in defense of the greater good. They create institutional cultures that reflect a sense of social justice. They have the resolve to make and stand by difficult decisions grounded in ethics and social responsibility.

Strong leaders understand that not all of their decisions can and should be publicly explained. But they do not take actions that they would be ashamed to publicly defend.

And, of course, I am not the first one to say this, but strong leaders don't just do things right; they have the courage to do the right thing.