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COMMENTARY

Leading From the Middle



Patric Sandri for The Chronicle

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Higher-education leaders are barraged with books, articles, and blogs extolling what it takes to be a great leader. Most of these writings assume a focus on being the leader of a college — president or chancellor — and leave uninvestigated the role of leading in the middle. But those in the middle make up the bulk of leaders on campus — department chairs, deans, and directors, for example.

Why is the midlevel leader important? A leadership crisis in higher education, particularly in the community-college sector, has long

been expected. The aging of top-level leaders (the average age of presidents is 61) and a lack of succession planning is cause for concern for governing boards and hiring committees. If we view leadership as a career pipeline, then the midlevel is where we want to cultivate the next generation of senior leadership.

Midlevel leaders are the ones who take care of day-to-day operations. People in these positions often offer stability to organizations because they stay longer than top-level leaders. Presidents, for example, have an average tenure of only five to seven years. It is midlevel leaders who run institutional strategic plans, engage with students, and determine the effectiveness of top leadership.

Part of the reason for the lack of attention to the middle involves how we define who is a leader. One argument is that individuals in midlevel administration don't see themselves as leaders, because those at the top don't look like them, and these models of exemplary leaders are what those in the middle think leadership should look like. Similarly, inherent biases about what a leader should look or act like often preclude others from viewing those in midlevel positions as leaders.

The tendency to think of leaders only as those people at the top of the hierarchy and/or holding certain positions also prohibits those in the middle from being viewed as leaders — by themselves or by others. What happens instead if we think of the type of leadership that is occurring in the middle ranks? How do models of leadership expand? Here are some ideas about how to think differently and leverage the power of these leaders to advance the mission of the institution.

Leaders' self-awareness. When midlevel leaders look in the mirror, often they do not see the reflection of a leader. Encouraging multiple possibilities for leadership can help, and the middle level offers more options for testing out enhanced views and perspectives of leadership models. Similarly, we know that people often do not consider themselves leaders until they hear it from someone else or until someone else suggests that they have leadership potential.

Breaking the mirror. The best leaders are those who surround themselves with people who have different — even opposing — strengths. However, when seeking new leaders or trying to tap new leadership, people at all levels tend to look for those who most closely resemble known conceptions of leadership. This leaves midlevel people, particularly women and people of color, at a disadvantage. Thinking about what really constitutes leadership and the type of leadership that is needed to move an institution forward requires new images of what it means to be a leader.

Authority versus power. Those in the corner office have authority because of their position, but power within an institution goes beyond position. Institutional knowledge, robust and broad relationships, ability to navigate conflict, strong framing skills, and an understanding of data are not linked to position but contribute to an individual's social capital and power. Power emerges at various points of relationship intersections and network hubs — often the exact location of the work of midlevel leaders, as their work cuts across the institution. Top leaders have a spotlight on them that often limits what they can say and do. For midlevel leaders, embracing the power of being unencumbered in this way allows them greater latitude to enact change.

Risk and ethics. Risk-taking is required for change. Posing the question "What is right for students?" recasts how leaders are willing to accept risks. The assumption of risk is different for people of privilege or for those operating in a safe and trusting culture than it is for those not working in such an environment. Presidents are often expected to be courageous; but the courageous and ethical leadership displayed every day in the middle ranks often goes unrecognized or is challenged.

Midlevel leaders are continually faced with ethical decisions as they carry out mandates, navigate student and faculty issues, and are held accountable to external reporting agencies. They must consider when a risk needs to be taken — such as speaking up about unethical behavior or disagreeing with an initiative — and when doing so would be unwise.

Repacking the toolbox. New strategies are required to address the complex problems facing colleges. The ability to build relationships, long a valued skill, differs now that the necessary relationships required in higher education are broader, with new partners, and are occurring across cultural borders. Networked leadership requires nurturing more connections, both personally and institutionally.

But working with people causes conflict. Learning how to deal effectively with conflict is crucial, especially in times of crisis. Midlevel leaders are conflict managers, a particularly valuable skill in an environment charged with calls for urgent change.

It's not about you. Leading requires checking your ego at the door. The focus should be on what is important for the college and for supporting student success. To be effective, this outward look requires understanding the institution's culture and being able to assess the context of new situations. Breaking down the us-versus-them barrier occurs more readily in the middle of the organization because of increased interactions among units and on an individual level. By employing deep and active listening techniques, those in the middle can get to the heart of problems. New midlevel academic leaders often come from the faculty, where accolades are based on personal performance. The move to administration requires a shift as midlevel leaders learn not to claim personal success but rather to deflect praise to joint efforts.

The future. Focusing on midlevel leadership creates a wealth of potential; the stability of operations in the middle helps support the type of disruption and innovation necessary for the institution to adapt to an uncertain future. Too much is at stake not to look to that talent for the strong campus leadership required to serve higher education well in the 21st century.

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