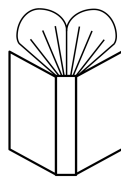


Well in the Lead

an academic leader's companion

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This publication is intended to offer the reader helpful insights into the universal experiences of academic leaders. Examples in the book are an amalgamation of the authors' personal and professional experiences. *Well in the Lead* is not a substitute for legal advice, career counseling, mental health care, or any other form of expert assistance. Please seek the services of a qualified professional if needed.

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a moment of vulnerability, we once heard a senior leader name the feeling in a large-group meeting: “I just don’t know who I can trust.”

At its essence, leadership is largely about relationships. And it’s hard to overstate the impact our relationships have on our well-being. When they’re good, they make everything better. And when they’re challenging, they can sap the joy from even the most glorious moments, should a glorious moment happen to occur by chance amid the turmoil of a life overrun with stressful, unsupportive relationships! So it makes sense that skillful leaders spend a lot of time cultivating and maintaining positive and supportive connections to others.

Perhaps we’re biased, having spent the bulk of our careers in higher education, but it seems that relationships can be especially complicated in an academic setting. Consider the staff leader seeking a sense of agency and autonomy while worrying about over-stepping within a shared-governance structure that prioritizes faculty perspectives, viewpoints, and input, or emphasizes faculty oversight. Or the associate professor who recently assumed a leadership role and worries about how their decisions will impact their colleagues’ willingness to support their case for promotion to full professor. We’ve both not only known these people; we’ve been them.

These experiences and others have taught us that relationships are critical and warrant thoughtful attention and intentional investments of time

and energy. Mentorship and sponsorship are special kinds of relationship, and for both faculty and staff on leadership tracks, mentors and sponsors play a significant role.

Faculty who enter leadership roles suddenly find their performance measured not by teaching evaluations, research productivity, and citations; these are requirements for scholarly advancement, but they are not the currency of leadership. Staff career-advancement paths in university settings are often obscure, and it can be hard to figure out how to rise into leadership.

From our own experiences and those of people around us, we have noticed that opportunities open and achievements are consolidated when members of the organization's leadership lend their support and endorsement to an aspiring faculty or staff leader. One of the most valuable gifts a mentor can offer is insights about things that lie beneath the surface: how others in the organization experience your actions or words as a leader, how organizational history can help or hinder an idea or initiative, or how you may be inadvertently standing in your own way.

Sponsorship entails advocating for someone who is not at the table. And for people from backgrounds that are underrepresented in academic leadership, having key supporters and confidants is particularly important to success.

One of the biggest leadership lessons we both continue to work on is to get better at leaning into,

rather than withdrawing from, challenging relationships. Difficult conversations are difficult for a reason. And as leaders, we have far less flexibility than we might like in picking and choosing with whom we interact. We may be tempted to dodge a meeting with a respected senior colleague who is hostile to a decision we've been asked to implement. We might find ourselves closing our eyes and taking deep breaths as we prepare to take the stage at a department meeting.

But there is a real risk of becoming isolated as a leader: if we cut ourselves off from critical feedback or difficult conversations, we withdraw from our colleagues, which in the end will not help us build a range of positive relationships across a spectrum of stakeholders.

Sometimes the feedback we need to hear may be buried in the crevices of a broader conversation or come to us in a whisper. Because of our positional authority, we might need to proactively open the door for people to voice concerns about our approach or behavior. Taking the time to reflect and stay curious, while being open to sharing some of our reflections or wonderings with a broad set of people rather than just those we work with most closely, is a way of doing this.

The more we practice those challenging conversations and the more we put ourselves out there and speak publicly, the more we find our own edges of growth. Little by little, it does get easier.