Academic Leadership: Building the Base Camp

Gurus live on mountain tops. In their long robes, they sit serenely, offering oracular pronouncements to the hardy souls who make arduous ascents in pursuit of enlightenment.

Those who climb the well-trodden path up Mt. Business Leadership, in fact, find there a temple full of richly robed masters—Jack Welch, Larry Bossidy, Jim Collins, and a host of others. All have best-selling scrolls and densely etched stone calendars to mark their speaking engagements and are surrounded by legions of followers learning to lead.

Not so at Mt. Academic Leadership. This peak remains mysterious and cloud enshrouded. Few know if a guru sits at its summit because only a few have scaled its treacherous, unmarked slopes. Those who seek enlightenment gather at the foot of the mountain and look up, wonderingly. Many pass by, sometimes wandering upwards, sometimes down, satisfied with the status quo.

Not many venture to explain the dynamics of academic leadership: how to move an academic unit—department, school, university—to higher levels of achievement, how to recognize reliably when that is happening, and how to make it happen again. No one can explain which leadership principles developed for business people are incomplete and inappropriate for academics and which work well in an academic setting.

Some day, an intrepid explorer will climb Mt. Academic Leadership. He or she will find the guru, or perhaps become the guru, and all will be made clear. In the meantime, let us attempt a humbler but still necessary task: that of constructing the base camp for that future hero’s journey. Let us formulate the questions and the basic ideas from which concerted approaches for academic leadership might rise.

QUESTIONS FROM THE EXECUTIVES
As dean of an engineering school, I spend more time on Mt. Business Leadership than many in academia because of the close working relationships I have developed with business executives. These include the numerous men and women who serve on the school’s board of visitors; who come to the school and share their strategies and experiences in our lecture series; and who manage the companies that recruit our students and alumni, perform joint research with our faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students, and obtain many forms of support from us through our technology entrepreneurship institute.

I have found that business people give as much or more thought to leadership development as they do to the development of other major corporate assets. At their best, they carefully define the leadership process and levels of responsibility, hold leadership workshops and seminars, test leadership skills in retreats, obtain analyses from consultants, develop case studies and discuss them at length, make leadership development an accountable activity, celebrate leadership successes, and act decisively to rectify leadership failure (which is not necessarily the same thing as leadership criminality, of which we are all aware). They profess a leadership culture, and the CEOs among them consider it a mark of success to have written or assisted in the writing of their own how-to books on the subject—to become one of the gurus at the summit.

Many are curious to know about leadership in American higher education. Some are surprised to learn that we lack many of the processes they take for granted, and some see their worst suspicions confirmed. “How can someone move from professor to department chair to dean, and perhaps to other leadership roles with almost no guidance or assistance?” they ask. “How can you afford to let this happen so haphazardly and not learn how to do it better?”

Their questions are worth considering. There are a small number of articles and books written about academic leadership to help the rising faculty or staff member, but the questions are worth considering.
but the good ones are often too specifically tailored to a particular institution. As far as training is concerned, the transition from a mid-level leadership role to a higher one often might entail no more than participating in a half-day workshop whose primary topic is proper preparation of paperwork. On the topic of effective ways to move an academic unit forward? Silence.

TOWARD SOME ANSWERS
Having given some thought to business executives’ questions and compared my experiences with theirs, I have developed a few ideas that may help to establish a better understanding of academic leadership—base camp for an eventual full attack on the summit. My premise is that, while there are many similarities between leadership in business and academia, the differences may be even more important, especially in this early stage of exploration. Let’s look at three areas of comparison: structural, operational, and cyclical.

HIERRARCHY VERSUS COMMUNITY
Unlike universities, corporations have well-defined and developed hierarchies, with clear levels of responsibility and function. As a result, corporate leaders can often enforce authority throughout organizational units and make changes rapidly when they decide it is necessary. They can readily reposition divisions and departments, change people’s job titles and functions, hire and fire, sell and buy, and set the corporation on a new track. If the CEO says it must be so, it must—until such time as the board of directors says otherwise, in which case they can restructure the CEO.

Academia is different. Here, the king of the realm is the tenured faculty member. To move a unit forward, be it a department, a college, or an entire institution, one needs to mobilize the faculty. Firing tenured faculty is not an option, and therefore hiring occurs slowly. Authority is dispersed. There is little in the way of leadership hierarchy.

This state of affairs is not going to change; it is indeed necessary to the academic enterprise, where the freedom to explore and critique ideas leads to new knowledge at the level of schools, departments, research groups, and individuals. What might be accepted and even praised as leadership in the corporate world is interpreted as interference in the university, considered autocratic by the academic community, and frankly, is the best recipe for a disastrous failure for the wishful academic leader. Does this mean that leadership may not be exercised there?

AN ACADEMIC LEADER’S INTERPERSONAL SKILLS MUST BE EXCEPTIONAL.

Let us imagine a leadership community—not an especially business-like term—that serves as a loose structure for an academic unit. It may, if managed correctly, result in a shared sense of ownership in which working to advance the unit to a new level of achievement is not primarily the responsibility of the unit’s titular head, but of all stakeholders in the unit—perhaps hundreds of people. Creating such a community is the key to energizing the unit, making difficult decisions, reallocating resources, and reaching higher levels of achievement. Of course, creating such a community will take time, probably years. And, it will be impossible if two conditions are not met: 1) that the community trusts the head and believes that she or he can make difficult decisions and is emotionally committed to the unit and 2) that everyone (and especially the head) works to achieve excellent communications, so that goals and decisions are clear.

An academic leader’s interpersonal skills must be exceptional. To create the leadership community required in an academic unit (to take the place of a leadership hierarchy), the academic leader must be able to unite highly accomplished, clever, and independent-minded people. Assistance and guidance in the development of such specialized skills would be a key training area for any academic leadership program. Perhaps clues might be found in the methods of creative directors in advertising agencies, who face related challenges with their writers, graphic artists, and other creative people.

PLANNING VERSUS EXECUTION
This may sound like stereotyping. While both academics and business people may engage in extensive planning to achieve progress, academics often seem to think that a great plan is an end in itself, rather like a great lecture or lesson. If they can set a vision, identify and articulate goals, and explain their idea clearly and completely—in effect teach the plan to their colleagues—that’s highly satisfying and really should be most, if not all, of what is necessary.

In the past decade or so, it’s become more fashionable than before for institutions of higher education to conduct strategic planning exercises. While most plans look alike, there are some innovative ones, reflecting a bold vision and hard strategic thinking. However, most good plans stop at that. Many academic administrators like to think that now they have completed the strategic thinking, developed a vision, created excitement and hope within the community, and even prepared a document with significant buy-in from all of their constituencies charting the path for achieving higher levels of excellence, good things will begin to happen, one after another. This is a fallacy and often a recipe for failure.

Corporate leaders may or may not plan as well, but they are expected to do something to make the plan work sooner rather than later and are evaluated on the execution and results. Corporate leaders are taught about the importance of execution, and their performance is evaluated on that basis. Corporate leaders constantly assess the organization’s capabilities, linking strategy to operations and the people in charge of them and tying rewards to outcomes.

In academia, there is much more tolerance for lack of execution. This is a crucial lesson for academics to learn from business. In fact, a great plan not executed is actually a negative. It uses resources, raises expectations, then causes disappointment, and increases the chances no one will help with future
planning exercises. Better to have a more limited, more feasible plan that is realized than a broader, more creative plan that goes unused.

The development of a strategic plan is the very first (and, frankly, the easiest) step in moving an academic unit forward. The hard work starts right there. How to execute every initiative and action, how to monitor the progress, how to convey the bad news without demoralizing the forces, how to use the positive developments to energize the people, and how to keep the strategic plan a living document are all the responsibilities of the unit head.

**SHORT VERSUS LONG CYCLES**

In the corporate world, the cycle of planning, performance, and evaluation is short. A new CEO is typically given 18 months to make an appreciable difference in the profitability, growth, or market share of his or her company. Corporate boards have little patience. They quickly declare victory or defeat and launch a new cycle.

In the academic world, the cycle may be as long as ten years. This point is the hardest for business people to understand and accept. They cannot imagine waiting ten years for anything. In ten years, a company may no longer exist or be so different as to be unrecognizable. An advance that does not occur now is not an advance.

Academic improvements take time, both to implement and to observe. If a leader introduces a change in the educational process, the students who will experience that change and be influenced by it must move through the school, take positions in the work place, and demonstrate by their performance that the change was a good one. Likewise, if a leader introduces structural changes that positively impact the conduct of research and scholarship, the value of those changes will be proven and recognized over years as it is brought into use in the world. In fact, it is natural in academia to view with skepticism improvements that seem to be so different as to be unrecognizable. Perhaps a way must be found to represent and honor the dual outlook needed from academic leaders, to identify as a kind of cultural distinction the ability to accept and utilize the apparent dissonance between the desire for change and the patience needed to realize that change—an ability we academics uniquely understand, value, and achieve.

**A CALL TO GATHER AT THE BASE CAMP**

The structural, operational, and cyclical differences between business leadership and academic leadership point to a set of deceptively simple rules for the aspiring academic leader.

- Build and work through a leadership community rather than attempt to use a hierarchy.
- Emphasize the execution of good plans more than the planning itself.
- Be prepared for delayed gratification (and to find satisfaction while waiting).

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**AUTHOR**

Nariman Farvardin received the B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in electrical engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, in 1979, 1980, and 1983, respectively. Since January 1984 he has been with the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he is a professor and holds a joint appointment with the Institute for Systems Research. He is also dean of the A. James Clark School of Engineering and was chair of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering (1995-2000). His research interests include information theory and coding, signal compression with applications to speech, image and video coding and transmission, high-speed communication networks, and wireless systems and networks. He has more than 150 technical papers in archival journals and conference proceedings. Dr. Farvardin was an associate editor for *IEEE Transactions on Communications* and *IEEE Transactions on Information Theory*. He chaired the technical program committee of the IEEE Speech Coding Workshop, Annapolis, Maryland, 1995. He received the 1987 NSF Presidential Young Investigator Award, the 1992 Maryland Industrial Partnerships Award of Excellence, and the 1993 Outstanding Systems Engineering Faculty Award from the Institute for System Research, University of Maryland. He is a Fellow of the IEEE.