1. Teaching leadership

When reviewing the promotional materials of most colleges and universities in the United States, we are hard pressed to find any without the use of the word “leader” or “leadership.” Regardless of the size of the institution (from small liberal-arts to research institutions), leadership seems to be a prized commodity. Yet, when we delve deeper into their catalogues and websites, the numbers dwindle. Teaching leadership goes beyond thoughtfully articulated mission statements. An examination of history and context matters in teaching leadership, because it provides insights into how leadership is taught and conceived of in different institutions. It also requires careful attention to the way we build curricular and co-curricular initiatives that expand our learners’ knowledge, competencies, and development in meaningful ways.

This chapter reviews the evolution of teaching leadership and its place in higher education. We approach the teaching of leadership as having three conceptual approaches – as an intellectual enterprise (the study of leadership), competency-building (leadership training), and the promotion of leadership development. We also frame the teaching of leadership through four levels of analysis – individual, team/community, organizational, and global. At the end of the chapter, we combine the three conceptual approaches and the four levels of analysis to create an overarching map of the different topics that are used in the teaching of leadership.

LEADERSHIP IS “IN”

When reviewing the mission statements of higher education institutions, we quickly spot the words “leader” and “leadership.” Princeton University, for instance, includes as one of its “defining characteristics and aspirations” “a commitment to prepare students for lives of service, civic engagement, and ethical leadership.”1 Colorado College aspires to similar goals: “Drawing upon the adventurous spirit of the Rocky Mountain West, we challenge students, one course at a time, to develop those habits of intellect and imagination that will prepare them for learning and leadership throughout their lives.”2
Our respective institutions show the same high level of interest in preparing undergraduate students for leadership. Marietta College has as its stated mission to provide “a strong foundation for a lifetime of leadership, critical thinking, and problem solving.” Dartmouth College conveys a similar desire and expresses it as preparing students for “a lifetime of learning and of responsible leadership.”

What is particularly striking about all of these mission statements is the connection made between leadership preparation and the commitment to a lifetime of leadership. However, many institutions do not take into consideration the level of intentionality needed when teaching leadership. To some, this preparation is offered as an indirect by-product of a traditional college or university education. This book, however, challenges educators to think more deeply about teaching leadership – as an intentional endeavor of higher education. Because the stakes are so high today, we can no longer leave “teaching leadership” to serendipity. Our programs and initiatives need to be carefully designed to produce deep impact.

A Brief History of “Teaching Leadership”

The history of “teaching leadership” at the undergraduate level in the United States has at its roots the great socioeconomic transformations that took place in American society in the 1960s. The social upheaval brought about by the various movements of this decade was expressed on campuses through a growing emphasis on civics education – how to prepare citizen-leaders to become engaged in the life of a pluralistic democracy. This movement took place at student life offices in the 1970s, and residence halls and campus organizations became the “test lab” for new ideas related to leadership. Concepts such as civic engagement, conflict resolution, democratic decision-making, and empowerment found avid takers on campuses whose administrations were eager to develop a more communitarian language of leadership.

In 1976, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) convened a Task Force (Commission IV Committee on Leadership), which was designed “to explore what was happening in leadership development through student affairs offices.” The Task Force encouraged the sharing of best practices among the ACPA members as a way to develop a comprehensive view of leadership development initiatives in higher education (Roberts, 1981). This publication eventually served as the basis for the development of the CAS Student Leadership Program Standards in the early 1980s under the direction of Susan Komives, Denny Roberts, and Tracey Tyree (Wells, 2015). Community service, volunteerism, and service learning emerged as new tools to advance leadership training.
(competency-building) on college campuses. These formal leadership programs were open to students from all majors.

Leadership scholars and practitioners spoke in the 1970s of a “crisis of leadership.” Everywhere we turned, it seemed that our leaders had let us down. John Gardner challenged the notion that we needed “better” leaders. Instead, he argued for “more” leaders – the concept of dispersed leadership (Gardner, 1993). This argument became a powerful one on college campuses, as higher education came to be seen as fertile ground for leadership training.

By the 1980s, many colleges and universities had begun to introduce for-credit courses dealing with leadership studies. These curricular offerings sought to bridge leadership education and leadership training. In many cases, faculties were hostile to the notion that leadership could be taught as an academic discipline. In 1986, for instance, Marietta College, a small liberal-arts institution in Ohio, received a substantial gift from the McDonough Foundation and family to establish a curricular-based undergraduate leadership program. This gift divided the faculty into three factions: one that was excited about the opportunity to develop an innovative initiative that would make the college distinct; another that was more pragmatic, willing to take the money, even if it meant going against its commitment to liberal-arts “purity;” and a third that was downright hostile to the idea that teaching leadership had any business in a pure liberal-arts classroom.

The first two factions banded together and supported the Trustees’ decision to accept the gift. The “winners” were given the resources to establish the first comprehensive, liberal-arts-based, undergraduate leadership program in the country. What was particularly fascinating about that debate in the 1980s was the notion that leadership education and the liberal arts were somehow antithetical. Yet some of the first liberal-arts-based leadership program institutions, including the University of Richmond’s Jepson School of Leadership Studies (founded in 1993 as the first academic school – as opposed to a program – of leadership studies in the world), argued effectively that many of the values traditionally associated with the liberal arts (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, intellectual curiosity) were associated with the competencies of successful leaders in the late 20th century.

**Teaching Leadership under Globalization**

By the 1990s, leadership was really “in” – just in time, as a fourth factor drove the popularity of the field: globalization. Just as in the 1970s, the last decade of the 20th century saw economic turmoil and political upheavals. Events such as the demise of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War,
the rise of China as an economic power, the relative economic decline of the United States, and the technological revolution in communication and transportation made for a very turbulent decade. Leaders on the political, social, and economic sides seemed ill-prepared to handle this onslaught of events.

These developments in the 1990s gave rise to the popularity of global leadership as a distinct field of research and education, compared to the “traditional” study of leadership (Mendenhall, 2013). Aspiring leaders were asked to learn about leadership not only as a human phenomenon but also as part of a cultural context. It was not enough to talk about leadership as the relationship between leaders and followers pursuing a goal. Now, leaders also had to take into consideration the cultural norms and values that guided this relationship. We could no longer assume that leaders and followers would be using the same cultural language. In the age of globalization, leaders and followers could be from different cultures, thus rendering the relationship much more complex than previously acknowledged.

By the beginning of the new millennium there was an emerging consensus in higher education that leadership had a place on campus. Note that we did not include the word “legitimate” next to “place.” To some faculty members and staff, the jury is still out about the legitimacy of leadership as an academic field of study. We will discuss this issue further in Chapter 3. For now, we can say that there is a general consensus that leadership is “in.”

“Drinking from the proverbial fire hose” became the apt metaphor to describe the incessant spewing of new information, crises, ethical challenges, and constant change in the new century. Somehow our leaders were supposed to thrive in this new environment. It became very clear that more attention needed to be paid to the ways in which our leaders were educated.

Today, there is a certain urgency to the task of developing leaders for the new millennium (Conger and Benjamin, 1999). While colleges and universities continue to incorporate civic engagement into the language of leadership development, there is a new interest in the pragmatic side of leadership education. As the cost of higher education continues to increase, parents are asking hard questions about the return on investment.

There is also an interesting convergence between the evolution of leadership and globalization. As the global marketplace has become increasingly competitive, students (and their parents) are turning to market differentiators on their resumes. Leadership studies is now viewed as a “value-added” benefit of a college education. Many of our alumni are quick to point out that having the word “leadership” on their resume made them more
noticeable in job interviews. The high cost of a college education is driving students to take a more “utilitarian” perspective on leadership – “How will this program help me get a better job?”

Yet a general overview of the field shows that the preponderance of undergraduate programs in the United States still emphasize the importance of civic engagement and service learning as the core value of leadership development. We are not arguing here for abandoning this emphasis and embracing a more competency-based approach. We are pointing out that there is, on many campuses, a convergence between the civic-engagement narrative (e.g., developing citizen-leaders) and the new millennium’s pragmatic focus on leadership competency-building as a “value-added” strategy.

In reality, the two sides are not exclusive. Gardner’s argument for dispersed leadership in the 1970s still resonates with our college students today. They see civil society deeply divided by economic inequality, race, religion, and ethnicity; and they wonder how leaders are making a positive difference.

Surveys of the Millennial and Z generations show a strong interest on their part in communitarian issues. They are engaged in community service and see themselves as contributors to the success of their communities. However, they also worry about finding a job after graduation.

Another aspect of the increasing emphasis on “value-added” education is found at the graduate level. While throughout the second half of the 20th century the focus of graduate-level leadership education was on research – the creation of knowledge that can be directly applied to the marketplace – there has been a proliferation in the past two decades of graduate programs focused on individual leadership development. The Internet has become a critical platform for online adult education in this area. Professionals are able to secure a graduate degree in leadership while still keeping a full-time job. A graduate degree is viewed as an opportunity to enhance one’s existing career – again, a “value-added” proposition.

THE “BRANCHES” OF LEADERSHIP

While a book about “teaching leadership” may seem to fall naturally under the leadership education rubric, the field of leadership studies actually has three branches (Roberts, 1981). Therefore, teaching leadership has different dimensions that need to be considered when developing programs. In other words, teaching leadership can be approached through three different lenses.
Teaching “about” Leadership

The first branch, leadership education, deals with leadership as an intellectual field of study. There is a body of knowledge related to this topic that we pass on to our students in the classrooms, as Chapter 3 will introduce. This body of knowledge has dramatically expanded in the past three decades and forms what we call the “leadership canon.” While we recognize that some scholars are not quite ready to call leadership a discipline – the same way that we talk about political science, biology, and economics – we contend that we are a lot closer to that level than we imagine (Harvey and Riggio, 2011).

In an insightful article for The Atlantic magazine, Tara Isabella Burton denounced what she called the American “obsession” with leadership. As she argues, “The implicit message behind the rhetoric of leadership is that learning for learning’s sake is not enough” (Burton, 2014). There is an emphasis in our college admissions process that puts the spotlight on the impact that our students will have on campus and beyond: “A desirable student is expected to do more than merely learn effectively, to further the transmission of knowledge from professor to student. They’re expected to go further.”

Burton highlights an important point – the satisfaction that can be derived from the acquisition of knowledge. Our leadership programs should provide an environment in which our aspiring leaders can be free to test out ideas. This intellectual dimension has a value in and of itself – allowing our students to sharpen their critical thinking and communication skills. These skills, in turn, open up the space through which we can teach “for” leadership.

Teaching “for” Leadership

Most of our leadership students do not join leadership programs because of the intellectual side of the field, although we suspect that with time that number will grow. They seek these programs because of the second branch – leadership competency-building. They are interested in acquiring the necessary competencies to become better leaders. This branch suggests a different approach to “teaching leadership.”

Our students expect us, instead of teaching about leadership, to teach “for” leadership. They want us to show the practical side of leadership, meaning that they associate teaching leadership with competency-building. Despite our deeper understanding of leadership at the scholarly level, the popular conception of leadership remains stuck in a simplistic formulation – the field of leadership should be connected to direct application of what a leader needs to be successful in an organization.
We should not necessarily assign a value hierarchy to the first two branches – as if leadership education is superior or inferior to leadership competency-building. In reality, they are deeply interconnected. When Marietta College was first established in 1835, its charter called for a quality education in the “various branches of useful knowledge” (McGrew, 1994). The term “useful knowledge” can be interpreted as a combination of the intellectual and experiential dimensions – the way we connect knowledge to action.

Teaching “Practical Wisdom”

If leadership education deals with teaching “about” leadership and leadership competency-building refers to teaching “for” leadership, what can we say about leadership development? The third branch, leadership development, is the result of the first two: knowledge plus experience leads to wisdom (Wei and Yip, 2008).

Can we teach leadership wisdom? In this book, we focus on “practical wisdom.” Through our programs – as Part III of the book will show – we allow our students to reflect on experiences and make connections between failure or success and the current state of knowledge of a field. This reiterative process allows the aspiring leader to grow not only in knowledge but also in wisdom. It is no accident that many societies value the wisdom of the elderly (Silverman and Siegel, 2018). They have seen more, experienced more, and hopefully derived life lessons that can be passed on from generation to generation.

We want to pass on not only leadership knowledge and competencies but also the wisdom that goes with the responsibility of being leaders and followers in complex organizations and societies. We want our students to reflect on their experiences and make connections between the canon and the real world; and that is how they will grow.

An important message that we often tell our students is that, once they graduate and receive their diploma, they are not done as leaders. In other words, leadership development deals with the process by which people become leaders, a topic that will be further explored in Part III of this book. From this perspective, leadership development represents teaching “to live” leadership.

Much attention in the Western leadership literature has been placed on defining leadership, as if we could all agree on a single definition. Joseph Rost (1993) cleverly argued that, if we put a group of scholars in a room, we would get as many different definitions of leadership as there were scholars. We do not flatter ourselves that we could offer the definitive definition. However, we think that a more productive intellectual direction in this...
debate might be to ask our learners if they have a “philosophy of leadership,” as opposed to having their own definition. By philosophy, we mean the value proposition that is an articulation of who you are as a leader.

We can view development as the acquisition of knowledge through education – the way that a political-science student could strive to become a political scientist by acquiring the knowledge of the field. Or we can approach development as the command of the tools through competency-building – the way that an aspiring political scientist would master statistical analysis and survey techniques in order to practice the craft.

Leadership development, however, calls for a much deeper understanding of the philosophy behind the process of becoming a leader. Leadership refers to “a way of being” in which leaders develop the principles and values that guide their behavior regardless of the context. The old saying “Character is how you behave when no one is looking” is particularly applicable in this case. Under leadership development, aspiring leaders tend to the nurturing of principles and values that will emerge as their philosophy of leadership.

**UNITS OF ANALYSIS**

In the previous section, we framed “teaching leadership” in terms of three separate branches. Another way to look at this area is to explore the organizing principles used in the teaching of leadership. We can organize these principles around four levels – individual, team, organizational, and global. Once we bring both the branches and the units of analysis together, the resulting three-by-four table allows us to explore how teaching leadership can take many programmatic forms. Each cell in this table represents a different focus an educator can take to teach leadership (Table 1.1). The multiplicity of areas demonstrates the many ways in which educators can guide aspiring leaders to combine knowledge and experience to develop leadership wisdom.

**Teaching at the Individual Level**

The “leader” still serves as an important organizing principle of leadership studies. For many educators, the teaching of leadership has to focus on the leaders and followers as individual contributors to the leadership process. That is the essence of leadership.

Many theories and models continue to emphasize the centrality of the leader in leadership (e.g., Conger, 1989; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991). Therefore, a leadership curriculum may pay attention to topics such as authentic leadership, servant leadership, and charismatic leadership. In
leadership education, this emphasis on the leader translates into a curricular focus on the theories and models that highlight the study of leaders’ traits. What are the ideal traits of effective leaders? Aspiring leaders also can benefit from leadership competency-building. The leadership literature is filled with “how-to” books that offer ways that leaders can expand their skill-sets (e.g., McClatchy, 2014; Heyck-Merlin, 2016). These sources can be incorporated into a leadership studies curriculum through workshops, leadership practicum courses, and exercises. They often offer quick steps to competency-building.

A third way of approaching leadership at the individual level is to focus on leadership development. In the previous section of this chapter, we introduced the notion of “practical wisdom” through the development of a personal philosophy of leadership. Leaders not only know leadership concepts and are able to apply leadership competencies, but also reflect on their experiences and use those insights to develop their own approach to leadership (Conant, 2011).

Table 1.1  Interconnected dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual level</th>
<th>Leadership education \ _Intellectual dimension\</th>
<th>Leadership training \ _Experiential dimension\</th>
<th>Leadership development \ _Growth dimension\</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the individual role of leaders and followers (leadership styles)</td>
<td>Competency-building experiences that enhance the leadership toolbox</td>
<td>Developing a personal philosophy of leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team/community level</td>
<td>Understanding the leader–follower relationship</td>
<td>Knowing how to lead effective teams (group dynamics)</td>
<td>Developing high-performance teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational level</td>
<td>Mastering the field of organizational leadership</td>
<td>Knowing how to lead effective organizations (situational awareness)</td>
<td>Developing high-performance organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global level</td>
<td>Mastering the field of global leadership</td>
<td>Acquiring global competencies (leading across cultures)</td>
<td>Becoming a global leader (transnational norms and values)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teaching at the Team Level

The next level in our understanding of teaching leadership is to bring the individual components (leaders and followers) together and see how they relate to one another. There is a growing segment of the leadership literature that examines the leader–follower relationship within the context of teams (e.g., Cobb, 2012; Wheelan, 2013). Our students can benefit from these studies and begin to formulate general principles related to group dynamics.

The experiential dimension of teams allows our students to put those principles into practice and experience first-hand how to lead effective teams. Through team projects, students quickly see the importance of “stepping up” (for the introverts) and “stepping back” (for the extroverts). They learn how to delegate and how to hold all members accountable for the success of the project.

The knowledge of different theories of group dynamics and the acquisition of team-related competencies ultimately provide our aspiring leaders with the insights that allow them to develop high-performance teams. One of the most often-cited researchers on team development is Bruce Tuckman, whose research in the 1960s uncovered four “stages” in the process (Tuckman, 1995; Tuckman and Jensen, 2001). He labeled each phase with a specific dynamic. When the team members come together, he characterized that stage as forming. This is the time when the participants become aware of the challenges they face, including the task and resources available and the different abilities each member brings to the team. Next, the team moves to the storming stage – the time when the team members wrestle with their different styles, strengths, and personalities. If teams successfully pass through this stage, they move to the norming phase – when the team members accept their differences and begin to work together to achieve the task. Once that is achieved, the team moves to the fourth stage – performing.

With leadership development (the growth dimension), we want our students to develop the wisdom that comes from knowing how individuals relate to one another in productive ways. Once they are able to practice Tuckman’s model and derive leadership lessons from their experiences, our students gain a deeper understanding of how to put together high-performance teams.

Teaching at the Organizational Level

The third level deals with the organizational context of leadership. Many of the how-to books tend to treat the leader–follower relationship as if
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it takes place in a contextual vacuum. In reality, we cannot separate this relationship from the surrounding environment.

Leadership education involves the study of organizational leadership as a separate field within leadership studies. This intellectual dimension allows aspiring leaders to learn how organizations work in different settings. There is a robust literature dealing specifically with organizational leadership, which can be offered in our leadership programs as a separate academic area.

Research at the organizational level also has yielded many insights that can be applied to leadership training. Many organizations spend millions of dollars every year to optimize team performance. Learning how to work collaboratively in organizations is indeed a growth industry in itself.

Ultimately, we want our aspiring leaders to combine the two dimensions (intellectual and experiential) to develop high-performance organizations (Cavaleri and Fearon, 1996). It is not enough to know intellectually the qualities of organizations that perform at a high level. We want aspiring leaders to take this knowledge and apply it to different contexts and, in the process, gain a deeper understanding of how organizations work.

Teaching at the Global Level

The global level has become particularly relevant in recent decades because of globalization. In fact, many leadership programs have added a global component to their curriculum in response to these changes at the global level. Many scholars now recognize that “global leadership” is a field of study in its own right (Mendenhall, 2013). When teaching about leadership, we now feel compelled to expose our students to this growing literature. They have to understand the historical forces that brought us to this point.

We make a distinction between “international” and “global.” While the former refers to the system of nation-states, the latter draws our attention to the forces that transcend national borders. Global leadership, therefore, is a topic that takes us beyond the study of leaders who operate at the international level – relations among the nation-states. Instead, it focuses on leaders who operate at the transnational level (Henson, 2016).

Multinational corporations contributed in the 20th century to this transnational perspective (Cohen, 2007). Globetrotting business executives participated in the building of an interdependent marketplace. More recently, with new communication technologies and lowering transportation costs, ordinary individuals have become a part of this increasingly interconnected world.

Now, global leaders deal with challenges that require global competencies – intercultural communication, conflict resolution, and global mindset, to
name a few (Cabrera and Unruh, 2012). Study-abroad programs have become an excellent opportunity for our students to gain many of these global competencies. However, our programs can also offer on-campus, competency-building exercises that allow our aspiring students to have intercultural experiences. Our campuses serve as a “global lab,” with an increasing number of students traveling to other parts of the world for an education.

As globalization takes hold, we see more and more the rise of “global leaders” as a separate category – beyond local, national, and international. Local leadership has always been the reality of social groups through millennia. National and international leadership are by-products of the “international system” created in Europe since the 1600s, in which borders and statehood defined the line separating domestic and foreign affairs. The term “international leaders” refers to those individuals who represent their nation-state in its relations with other nation-states. Global leadership deals with issues that transcend the individual nation-states and create transnational challenges.

Many of our students will operate at this transnational level and will take on the “global leader” role. It is incumbent upon us – as educators – to create the environment in which they will understand the historical processes that brought us to the realities of the 21st century (intellectual dimension), to help them develop the global competencies required to be effective contributors to global organizations (experiential dimension), and ultimately to guide them as they take their first steps to becoming “global leaders.”

As we have seen in this chapter, teaching leadership is a complex tapestry of different branches and units of analysis. All these branches and units of analysis require an understanding of citizenship, the “process whereby the individual and the collaborative group become responsibly connected to the community and the society through the leadership development activity.” The ultimate goal is to achieve positive change and societal good (Komives et al., 2009).

In the next chapter, we will introduce another layer of complexity, as we explore the interdisciplinary roots of leadership studies. The teaching of leadership can take place in many different disciplinary settings, each contributing to our understanding of this human phenomenon.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. Does your institution use the words “leader” and “leadership” in its promotional literature and website?
2. If the answer to the previous question is “yes,” do these references reflect an intentional strategy to promote leadership development?
3. If the answer to the first question is “no,” is that omission intentional? How does “leadership” fit in the institutional mission?

4. How does leadership studies add “value” to a college education?

5. Looking at Table 1.1, assess your institution’s strengths and challenges within each cell of the table. For instance, how does your institution address the students’ educational needs in the area of global leadership?

NOTES


6. Conger and Benjamin (1999) call this the “new imperative.”

7. Tuckman amended this cycle in the 1970s to include a fifth stage – adjourning (once the task is completed and the team is dissolved; or when the team stops performing and breaks up).

8. Astin et al. (1996, p.23). Astin et al. describe their approach to leadership development in A Social Change Model of Leadership Development: Guidebook. The model examines leadership development at the individual, group, and community/society level to effect positive change.

REFERENCES


Teaching leadership