Introduction

We sometimes hear from skeptical faculty, staff, students, parents, or employers this question: “Can you really teach leadership?” The emphasis of the question tends to fall on the word “teach.” In a nutshell, the direct answer to this question is “Yes, you can.”

But that is the simple answer. As in all matters of human phenomena, the real answer is much more complex and deserves a deeper investigation than simply those three words. And that is what has compelled us to write this book – to explain what we mean when we say “Yes, we can teach leadership.”

In saying that we can teach leadership, we challenge faculty and staff as educators, as well as students, parents, or employers, to confront this question directly by addressing four other questions: What do we mean by teaching leadership? Why is it important to teach leadership? How do we teach leadership? And what impact does our leadership teaching have on our learners?

This book is written for educators in undergraduate and graduate-level leadership programs in universities, professional schools, technical institutes, and government institutions, as well as for those working in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. These educators seek intellectual challenges, resources, and pedagogical tips to expand their instructional capabilities. While this book is written based on our personal experiences in developing and implementing programs in two liberal-arts institutions in the United States, we believe that concepts covered in the book also transcend national or cultural boundaries. We encourage readers to adopt, adapt or adjust this information to their particular situations and cultural contexts.

This book is written with a particular point of view about leadership. Challenging as it is, leaders must strive to make a positive difference in the lives of others and on our world. This requires empathy. Put simply, empathy is the ability to share and understand the feelings of others. In addition, we strongly believe that leaders should be elegant. This means they should have a leadership presence, inspire confidence in others, and use and choose words intentionally. They should be humble, honest, full of integrity, and transparent. Leaders should demonstrate empathy and
other traits, all of which can be practiced, learned, and enhanced through training and deep reflection.

Leaders can be found or developed in formal and informal ways. Some are selected or elected to formally serve as “positional leaders.” Others might serve as informal leaders within institutions and their communities. Regardless, as formal or informal leaders living and working at all levels within organizations and our global society, they should model behaviors that generate joy, hope, promise, and thoughtful engagements with others. Leadership by inciting fear or division is never a healthy option for society – domestically or globally.

The question “Can you teach leadership?” usually carries certain assumptions about the nature and value of leadership. The way this question is asked tends to reflect a biased view of nature versus nurture, which suggests that leaders are born and not made. We believe that leadership offers value, and we need good leadership to make a positive difference in the world. To achieve this, we need engaged leaders, along with followers who are concerned and engaged citizens. Our goal as educators should be to create the conditions in which we inspire leaders and engaged citizens alike.

At the programmatic level, we have to address questions related to methodology and expected outcomes: How do leadership programs add value? What are we doing well programmatically? What gaps do we need to address? What are some techniques that will enhance our teaching of leadership? We invite participants and educators in leadership programs to walk away with this understanding: it’s all about you and not at all about you. It is about striking the delicate balance between focusing on yourself to become self-aware and working with others to make an impact on communities and causes that are larger than yourself.

Often, the students who choose to participate in leadership programs have been told from an early age that they were born to be leaders. Growing up, they were encouraged to take on leadership roles in school and in the community. For the students who did not grow up hearing that they were “natural” leaders, the idea of participating in a structured leadership program can be intimidating. Yet our programs are just as beneficial to these students as they are to the so-called “born leaders.” The reality is that our methodologies should take into consideration that teaching leadership goes beyond the nature versus nurture debate. Our programs must offer personal and professional growth experiences that will challenge all of our students, both intellectually and developmentally.

Why is it important to teach leadership? While much of the pragmatic focus centers on the individual benefits that a leadership program may bring to the emerging leaders, leaders also provide an important social
function. The empirical study of leadership may be only a hundred years old, but philosophers and political thinkers have written about and dealt with concepts and issues related to leadership for millennia, as far back as Plato’s discussion of leadership in the Republic in 500 BCE.

Thus, this book is also written with the point of view that institutions and organizations in the for-profit, nonprofit, and public-service sectors need good and effective leaders. As educators in higher education, the more we do to prepare both positional and informal leaders to take on leading roles and strive to make a positive difference, the better off the world will be. This is not an idealistic proposition. It is grounded in realistic expectations that societies work best when they have highly educated leaders who are well versed in the complexities of leadership.

Teaching leadership matters because properly prepared leaders can make a hugely positive difference in our lives. The opposite is also true. We seem to willingly accept the idea that leaders do not need some basic education and training in order to perform satisfactorily, and yet we are sometimes surprised by the ineptitude of our leaders in action. The stakes, therefore, are high. As educators, we play a critical role in preparing the next generation of leaders not only to appreciate the complexities of leadership, but also to translate that knowledge into productive action, yielding substantive results.

Our focus on the connection between theory and practice springs from our concern that many aspiring leaders view themselves as “natural” leaders who are able to exercise leadership on the fly. They eagerly jump into action without having an understanding of how leadership works. To us, that is comparable to giving a piano to a child and expecting him or her to learn how to play simply by hitting the keys over and over again.

Yes, there are virtuoso players who quickly master the instrument and surpass the best of instructors. Those are rare cases. For most of us, the art and science of learning to play an instrument require long hours of focused practice – and proper instruction. One of the chief benefits of instruction, piano teachers tell us, is to avoid the development of bad habits, which keep a good player from becoming a great player.

And so it is with leadership. As an educator, you will help aspiring leaders to become aware of the theories and practices of leadership in a way that allows them to develop good habits. As learners master both the content and the experiential side of leadership, they will also discover their own voices. We should not teach leadership with a cookie-cutter approach. Each aspiring leader has his or her own personality. Your role as an educator is to help those leaders grow and become competent contributors to society.

This book is designed to give you an opportunity to engage in deep introspection. Throughout, we list reflection questions to help you become
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a more thoughtful educator of leaders. You can use these questions for personal reflection or as discussion questions with your colleagues. We encourage you to adapt them to meet your needs. We also hope that this process helps you and your learners to articulate your own philosophy of leadership and that this book will help you gain a deeper understanding of the impact that you have on future generations of leaders. “Teaching” leadership requires the educator to create and establish an environment in which it is at times difficult to pick out the educator and the participant. The end result is a platform upon which educators and students alike tread the path of lifelong learning.

The book is divided into three parts. In Part I, we explore teaching about leadership with a focus on the curricular side of leadership education. Aside from reviewing the empirical study of leadership, we suggest a leadership curriculum that takes into consideration the different components of leadership – leaders, followers, goals, context, and cultural norms or values – while at the same time recognizing that leadership draws its intellectual strength from a wide variety of fields.

In Part II, we focus on developing leadership competencies and capacities through co-curricular programming. We stress the importance of establishing a learning environment that promotes leadership competency and capacity. Through careful program conceptualization, we can establish powerful opportunities for our learners. Planning effective sessions can enhance the impact that our programs have on the participants. We appreciate the reality that some programs are more resource-intensive than others and that some schools or institutions are more fortunate than others to have resources directed toward leadership activities. But, regardless of resource intensity, the principles that make leadership programs great is being mindful, intentional, and organized in developing, implementing, and evaluating a program. When educators do all of this, they are likely to see results, which will create an effective argument for securing resources.

Part III builds on the other two components by searching for and exploring ways in which leaders can continue to grow and develop. As leaders in our world today, we face the daunting task of staying equipped to address challenges we face as the world around us changes rapidly. We suggest that understanding the complex facets of leadership and developing leadership skills and competencies prepare our students to grow even more after they graduate and can apply lessons learned in a workplace setting. This growth depends on: understanding the importance of mentoring and being mentored; recognizing that growing as leaders is a lifelong process; and developing the ability to practice “practical wisdom.” As educators, we should create intellectually supportive environments in which our efforts continue to play a role beyond the campus walls.
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The three separate parts of this book are not designed to build silos, and we recognize that leadership studies is a complex enterprise that does not necessarily fall into neat, separate categories. Rather, the three parts of the book provide an examination of the aspects that, once brought together, can have a powerful impact on our graduates and our world.

Curricular and co-curricular initiatives live in interconnected spaces that provide opportunities for integrated programming. “Curricular” in this context refers to courses that focus on leadership or incorporate leadership that are offered for academic credit. “Co-curricular” refers to activities, workshops, programs, or experiences that inform and complement subjects that students are learning through academic course work and can lead to leadership certificates or other credentials.

After reading this book and putting many of its suggestions into practice, you will be participating in an academic movement that goes beyond intellectual curiosity. The next time a skeptical educator, student, parent, or employer asks you if you can teach leadership, you will be ready to launch into an exhilarating discourse about the different ways this question can be answered – and how the answer informs the approach we take to addressing the urgent need to develop leaders for a complex and challenging world.

This book represents a collaboration between two academic centers at two different institutions and has been successful because we have similar missions as well as a similar understanding and approach to leadership education and development. As co-authors, we have been influenced by Paulo Freire’s teachings and, in particular, his message in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This influence has informed how experiential learning can be incorporated at our respective organizations.

This collaboration has enabled both institutions to reflect on their efforts and, we hope, add to the body of knowledge regarding leadership and teaching leadership. As co-authors, we also share common values and believe that having fun is an important part of co-creating a product. We are committed to continuously seeking to improve the quality of our curricular and co-curricular offerings and to try new, and potentially more effective, ways of presenting new information, and we encourage you to do the same.

This book represents several years of experimentation and rework to create programs that are responsive to our learners. At the time of this writing, programs we established have undergone many changes. For this, we thank all our colleagues and the speakers who, despite their busy schedules, have shown patience, enthusiasm, and dedication to making responsive and relevant programs for participants.

We also have received early indications that the approach and methodologies we have outlined in this book may be applicable in various settings.
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For example, alumni participating in our leadership programs have used them in for-profit and not-for-profit settings. Finally, a leadership program for post-doctoral candidates is being conceptualized. So please use, adopt, adapt and adjust the information contained in this book to fit your own mission and vision. As you venture forth to teach leadership, we look forward to hearing from you about what works and what does not work in your particular context. We wish you success in implementing any of the lessons described in this book and from your independent exploration of this important topic.