What Is Leadership?  By Brent Ruben and Vivian Fernandez

Mention the importance of leadership and heads nod. Walk down the business aisle of the local bookstore or peruse the list of presentations at the annual conference of a professional association and you reach the same conclusion. The message seems clear enough: strong leadership is vital — in civic and community groups, in healthcare and education, in business, in national and international affairs. There’s no lack of agreement that leadership is important and that more effective leaders are needed. However, when it comes to discussions of what leadership is and how one can become more effective as a leader, there is far less consensus. And as with so many other concepts that we find easy to define in the abstract, the devil generally finds his way into the day-to-day details of operationalization.

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In the case of human resources and leadership, those details are vital because they underpin efforts to identify, recruit, develop, recognize and reward the individuals needed to advance organizations. And, as personal experience, the pages of the higher education publications and public sentiment make clear, there may be no sector where these HR capabilities are currently more critical than in higher education.

What Is Leadership?

There is a widely held assumption that effective leadership is one of the most crucial factors in organizational excellence. That said, what exactly is leadership, and what capabilities are most important for leadership effectiveness?

The Vertical and Horizontal Perspectives

A persuasive traditional view has been that outstanding leadership is best provided by individuals who have proven themselves to be outstanding performers in their field. They are outstanding because they have acquired superior technical, disciplinary and job-specific knowledge and capability in a particular line of work, and as a consequence they have the knowledge and skills to lead others in the organization to similarly high levels of performance.

In this view, we should expect to find the most promising future IT leaders to be the best trained and highest performing individuals in an IT department. In like fashion, the most promising leaders of an academic department would be those identified as first among equals when it comes to teaching and scholarship, and the best prospects for outstanding chief academic or business officers would be individuals who have distinguished academic or financial careers. This way of thinking represents what might be termed a vertical view, emphasizing as it does the importance of silo-based, context- and position-specific experience, knowledge and skill as the critical ingredients for effective leadership.

No thoughtful person doubts the relevance of such qualities for leadership roles. That said, many who study organizational leadership increasingly recognize that this seemingly common sense view oversimplifies matters. A more nuanced perspective is that while vertical, context-specific experience, knowledge and skill is important to a point, beyond that point other competencies often become more essential to outstanding leadership than technical or position-specific knowledge and skill. Lending support to this view are the many instances where leaders who were very well-educated and technically accomplished in their field were quite unsuccessful as leaders in those fields. The conclusion is straightforward and yet quite profound: disciplinary expertise is important but generally an insufficient basis for leadership excellence. Additional capabilities are required.

So what are these additional capabilities? The popular, professional and scholarly press offers many suggestions — so many in fact, that a casual effort to review and synthesize the many conceptualizations can lead rather quickly to overload and confusion. After having reached precisely this conclusion, I decided to conduct a systematic review and analysis of a broad sampling of leadership literature with the goal of developing an integrative framework for making sense of the various viewpoints.

The review covered more than 100 writings on leadership, and the goal in each case was to identify the knowledge sets and skill sets that various authors have deemed important to leadership and leadership effectiveness and to organize them into categories. One of the things I found most striking in my research is the extent to which many of the capabilities identified as essential to outstanding leadership are generic and cross-cutting and not specific to any one context or line of work. Rather, these capabilities transcend positions, fields, organizational types and sectors. This represents what might be termed a horizontal view of leadership.

The Leadership Competency Framework

After a thorough review of the literature, I was able to create a competency framework and scorecard (What Leaders Need to Know and Do: A Leadership Competencies Scorecard (Ruben 2006)), which identifies five thematic areas, or leadership competency clusters, each composed of a number of more specific competencies. This
framework incorporates both the vertical and horizontal perspectives, reflecting the assumption that the two knowledge sets and skill sets are complementary in thinking about leadership effectiveness.

The first competency cluster captures the vertical view of leadership. Termed positional competencies, this area refers to knowledge and skills related to the particular type of work, discipline, setting or context. Positional competencies include field/discipline/sector-specific education, training, experience, expertise and knowledge, as well as organizational knowledge, familiarity with the work and professional involvement. Positional competencies are necessary elements for leadership excellence but generally are insufficient in and of themselves.

The four additional thematic competency areas reflect the horizontal view of leadership, and include personal competencies, organizational competencies, communication competencies and analytic competencies. Personal competencies refer to standards, character and expression of values, including ethics; personal character; cognitive ability and creativity; enthusiasm; maintenance of high standards; personal conviction; persistence; self-discipline; self-confidence; and role modeling.

Organizational competencies are the administrative capabilities that are necessary for leadership in organizations of varying purpose, function and size, including vision setting; strategy development; goal attainment; management and supervision; information and knowledge management; boundary spanning; use of appropriate information and communication technologies and strategies; collaborative decision making; empowerment; teaching and coaching; and change, risk and crisis management.

Communication competencies include the knowledge and skills necessary for effective interaction in interpersonal, group, organizational and public settings, among them credibility and trust; influence and persuasion; interpersonal relations and teambuilding; listening and attention; question asking and learning; writing and public speaking; diversity and intercultural relations; and facilitation, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Analytic competencies refer to thoughtful reflection on one's own and others' behaviors and careful consideration of the consequences of alternative leadership options and strategies, including self-assessment; problem analysis and problem solving; stakeholder analysis; organizational and situational analysis; analysis of technology; and review and analysis of results.

Formal and Informal Leadership — Both Are Critical

The leadership competency framework calls attention to the importance of the horizontal (cross-contextual and transcendent) competencies needed for outstanding leadership, as well as the vertical, position- and context-specific competencies. Nowhere do personal, communication, organizational and analytic competencies seem more important right now than in higher education.

This is a time where the chorus of discontent and disruption is distracting, sometimes nearly deafening. These refrains have become all too familiar: our economic models are unsustainable; our institutions stagnant; our work processes inefficient and overly bureaucratized; our faculty and staff complacent and defensive; we don’t tell our story well; we don’t listen effectively to our critics; we resist innovation; we are incremental when we should be transformative; we’re not accountable.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to turn away from these voices and the sometimes indistinguishable blend of perception and reality to which they refer.

Much of the problem and the solution comes down to leadership, the kinds of organizations and culture we create together, and the ways
in which we relate to one another and our external constituencies. The importance of formal leadership in addressing the challenges of the day cannot be overemphasized. Leaders in every position throughout our institutions have a vital role to play in bringing appropriate disciplinary knowledge, personal integrity and character, communication capabilities, organizational expertise, and analytic acumen to their work — all of which are important to assess and improve our institutions and to tell the story of our advances in persuasive and compelling ways to our multiple internal and external stakeholders.

In emphasizing the role played by formal leaders, it is easy to overlook the importance of informal leadership and the influence each of us has through the hundreds of face-to-face and mediated interactions we have each day. Every such encounter with students, faculty, staff or visitors represents a leadership moment, an opportunity to further advance the purposes of the institution and to develop the knowledge and skills that help to enhance our personal and professional capabilities.

HR and Leadership Development
Of the many areas where the work of human resources is of strategic importance within colleges and universities, perhaps none is more significant than leadership development. In emphasizing the importance of an appropriate blend of leadership competencies in recruitment, selection, training, recognizing and rewarding employees — and in creating a culture where informal as well as formal leadership is valued — the role of HR is indispensable.

Unfortunately, it is not a simple matter to translate that proposition into language that is clear and compelling to the broad cross-section of faculty and staff or to mobilize colleagues to action in support of these aspirations. One simple but helpful framework for this purpose identifies four leadership roles that all employees and all units can play: teachers, stewards, ambassadors and agents of change.

Teachers
Employees in universities have no choice as to whether to adopt this role or not. We are all teachers — faculty, of course; but also staff and especially HR professionals.

We teach in all that we do and all that we don’t do. Faculty teach in the classroom and lab, staff teach in offices, residence halls, cafeterias, libraries — through the multitude of encounters they have with students, colleagues and visitors on a daily basis.

Because of the visibility and pervasive impact of their interactions and work, HR professionals have special opportunities in this regard — providing lessons through the systems, policies and procedures that they create and manage. These actions and their consequences shape the perception of HR, its staff and the institution. As individuals, and as members of HR departments, each day affords any number of teaching/leadership development moments, and with them opportunities to teach colleagues about collaboration, client service, coping with change, conflict and conflict resolution, knowledge sharing and responding constructively to criticism.

The teaching moments are a given; the lessons we provide depend on the way we enact our roles as HR professionals and the personal and professional choices we make. Whatever those understandings and choices are, it should come as no surprise that these actions can have a significant and rippling “training effect” that is probably far more influential over time than any formal orientation or training program.

Stewards
Together, faculty and staff are stewards of the campus environment. The most obvious way to think about an institution’s environment is in physical terms: buildings, grounds, equipment. But there is also a learning environment and a cultural environment. And all three are important to the mission of the institution and are directly influenced by faculty and staff behavior. Perhaps most obvious is the role each employee can play in
maintaining the physical environment of the institution. While the facilities department is generally the unit seen as being directly responsible for this work, leading organizations such as Disney recognize that cleanliness and upkeep of the workplace is part of every employee’s work. In the same way that most of us would feel responsible for picking up an item of trash thrown on our property, this same sense of responsibility and ownership can be an important element of the way we feel for the physical environment of our campuses.

Likewise, creating and maintaining a culture that promotes and recognizes the values of respect, civility, professionalism and service in each conversation, each phone call, each bulletin and each e-mail can certainly be a fundamental and explicit part of the work of each employee, particularly those who work in human resources and have the capacity to serve as powerful role models for others.

**Ambassadors**
All employees of a college or university are full-time ambassadors for their fields, their institution and higher education in general. There’s no decision to be made about whether to be or not be an ambassador; the only decision that must be made is what kind of ambassador role one will play. Through words and actions, everyone who works in higher education is an ambassador — everywhere, all the time, inside and outside the institution.

Faculty and staff are the windows through which our friends, neighbors, acquaintances and the public view us. The images the general public develops of our institutions and of higher education is the sum of the impressions we create in our ambassador roles. As important as public service announcements and formal publicity can be in creating the brand or identity of an institution, that influence is likely to pale in comparison to the impressions created by its workforce. Human resources plays a particularly influential role in this regard, as the division most responsible for recruiting and orienting the institution’s ambassadors — who then become the face of our institutions and their most persuasive spokespersons.

**Agents of Change**
Faculty and staff have a personal decision as to whether or not to become an agent of change and innovation. If we are dedicated to the advancement of our institutions and higher education, the choice is a clear one. Each of us in our own spheres of activity and influence can be a force for innovation and change, for identifying and adopting best practices, and for encouraging and recognizing others who adopt these same values and behaviors. Agents of change operate at all levels. In each activity we perform, each position to which we’re assigned and each endeavor we undertake we can be instruments of change and improvement — striving for the highest standards of excellence.

**HR As Role Model**
Higher education faces a great many daunting challenges. None is more fundamental than recruiting, developing, recognizing and rewarding outstanding individuals who possess the necessary positional and disciplinary knowledge and skill set, but who also excel in personal, communication, organizational and analytic competencies. We need colleagues who will assume leadership within our institutions — in formal positions and also in the host of informal roles that present themselves every day at all levels. All faculty and staff have significant opportunities for leadership influence as teachers, stewards, ambassadors and agents of change; but no single unit has a more significant role relative to these values than human resources.

HR professionals can and should be role models on campus. Role-modeling means self assessing, welcoming critique, looking for new approaches and models, implementing new services, being open to experimentation, and continually improving; in short, becoming a model of the way effective individuals and organizations operate.

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Brent D. Ruben is professor of communication and executive director of the University Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University. He can be reached at bruben@rutgers.edu.

Vivian Fernández is vice president for faculty and staff resources at Rutgers University. She can be reached at vfernandez@hr.rutgers.edu.