

# Toward Leadership Education That Matters

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The Porter and McKibbin (1988) report was the opening salvo in a campaign of “shock and awe” intended to awaken business schools to the need for change. As in the current situation in Iraq, the liberation of the professors was not followed by a sympathetic uprising embracing change. Instead, a long, simmering campaign followed. Every few years, the allied forces for change would launch a renewed campaign only to see it fall on deaf ears (Hambrick, 1994; Mowday, 1997; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001).

## The Professoriate as Its Own Worst Enemy

The problem is twofold. First, business schools themselves are not inclined to change from within and are impervious to change from without. Nevertheless, professors preach to students about the rapidly changing, paradigm-shifting, complex environment of business. According to them, this turbulent business environment has led to a dismantling of the old hierarchies in favor of responsive, innovative networks; a constant search for improved processes and new products and services to offer to an increasingly fickle customer; and training and empowering of employees for the purpose of serving a single, coherent

**ABSTRACT.** Given the recent wave of corporate scandals, the very credibility of business schools’ handling of leadership education is now in question. Alternative forms of leadership education are taking root and most likely will be well established before business schools enter the competition. In this article, the author examines institutional and personal barriers preventing change and offers suggestions for a holistic, practical approach to leadership development.

vision. All of this is occurring while business schools remain organized to serve an industrial world that no longer exists.

In business schools, knowledge is still compartmentalized, learning remains a teacher-centered exercise, and the professoriate has so diminished its contact with the business world that it barely understands the conditions that real managers encounter. In this regard, our understanding of what managers do is based on a lone researcher’s 30-year-old observations (Mintzberg, 1973) of a handful of executives. A considerable number of current textbooks still reference this one source as a basis for study. The problem is significant: Only 53% of submissions to a special research forum on knowledge transfer between academics and practitioners reflected direct contact with practitioners (Rynes et al., 2001).

In this article, I argue that the culture of business schools remains heavily ori-

ented toward the production of traditional forms of research about conventional issues. This culture reinforces its perpetuation through two insidious methods: (a) promotion and tenure decisions that exclusively reward conventional academic behavior and (b) the fiercely guarded professorial privilege of being treated as sole proprietors, which inhibits cooperation between professors of varying disciplines. Compartmentalized departments offer courses taught by individual professors granted virtual sovereignty in the classroom as long as they publish in journals chosen according to their degree of statistical rigor. In addition, the hiring and reward system is designed more for cloning than for challenging the conventional wisdom and traditional practices. In this kind of teaching environment, the personal practice of leadership behavior is unnecessary, even misguided.

Regarding the latter point, the behavioral practice of leadership—if it is offered at all—is derided as a “soft skill,” an unnecessary part of the curriculum, too indeterminate and unpredictable or too “touchy-feely” to be meaningful. This tendency is evidenced by the elective status of the subject in most business schools. Harvard MBAs, like most, only take a single relevant course, Leadership and Organizational

Behavior, and Northwestern's Kellogg School also requires only a single course, *Strategies for Leading and Managing an Organization*. Whether graduates of such MBA programs succeed as leaders or not will depend almost entirely on happenstance without any deliberate effort on the part of the schools that educated them.

The second problem is in the body of knowledge itself. The conceptualization and definition of leadership in business schools and the methods used to teach it are so abstract and fragmented that a student who has had the fortitude to memorize Fiedler's (1967) contingency situations and Vroom and Yetton's (1973) decision-making methodology will know much about complicated models but nothing about his or her own ability to use them—to actually lead. Because we value research about leadership, that is what we teach. Faculty members in business programs have removed the experience and practice of leadership from the classroom.

Consider the following thought experiment to grasp the unfortunate situation that we face: Look outside your window. What do you see? Describe it to yourself, and attempt to derive meaning from what you see. Obviously, there is no single truth. One individual may become saddened by the bleakness of an inner-city, trash-strewn wasteland; another might become so engrossed as to be transported back to a scene in her youth. A single interpretation of perspective is not the point; rather, the exercise demonstrates personal meaning and whether or not an individual's experience is perceived in a positive or negative way. The following example shows how almost all researchers would describe the same scene in a management journal:

There are various organic and inorganic materials in the field of vision and their interaction effects are unstable due to the complexity of the climatic uncertainties and low correlation between the movement of the rapidly decaying organic matter against the slow decaying of the inorganic matter. Because the perspective of the viewer is subject to dynamic internal states and is unreliable, it is highly unlikely ( $p > .05$ ) that any meaning can be derived from the one perspective.

Where is the experience of using leadership skills and placing one's

behavior in the context of collective social action? Where is the risk-taking in leadership education and development; the classroom experimentation; the grappling with the personal aspects of students' (and faculty members') relationships, beliefs, values, and sense of self in a context involving social influence? In this regard, although business faculty members typically claim to be preparing students for the "real" world, they actually remove students from it during the learning process by concentrating on abstractions impossible to apply and test in the real world. Perhaps this situation arises because so many professors on the tenure track have not had significant experience in doing what they are teaching, or they simply prefer the elegance of theory untainted by the messy complexity of the real world.

### **A Void in Graduate Business Leadership Development Concentrations**

Faculty members of business programs, especially those in the discipline of management, are not providing adequate leadership practice (development) even if we credit them with adequate theoretical leadership education. Leadership development just does not happen during a teacher-centric course that focuses on theoretical content. Such courses are comparable to driver education classes that do not place the student behind the wheel of a car.

Although 120,000 MBAs are granted each year, according to a survey of 5,000 human resource personnel by Development Dimensions, "82 percent of organizations have difficulty finding qualified leaders" (Buss, 2001, p. 45). Thus, companies seeking leadership must look elsewhere and may hire special consultants to fill gaps in capabilities of a local work force. In response to this need to develop leadership throughout an organization, Charan, Drotter, and Noel (2000) and Tichy (2002) have published texts focusing on the issue and have developed successful consulting practices aimed at initiating in-house leadership development programs.

The lack of formal leadership development programs is echoed by

researchers recently analyzing graduate concentrations in business. Crawford, Brungardt, Scott, and Gould (2002) found 40 schools in the United States offering graduate programs in organizational leadership, but only two were concentrations in an MBA program. Business schools seem to have accepted a default view that leadership is simply "what leaders do" and that leaders are simply people in positions of power over others. In that mindset, paradoxically, the study of leadership is simply risk reduction and creation of conformity with the desires of the boss.

All other professions—from accounting, architecture, and engineering to law, medicine, nursing, and K-12 teaching—require previous or concurrent practice by staff and include student internships; counseling practica; moot courts; apprenticeships; supervisions; or other experiential components for certification, such as medical residencies, student teaching, and clinical semesters for nurses.

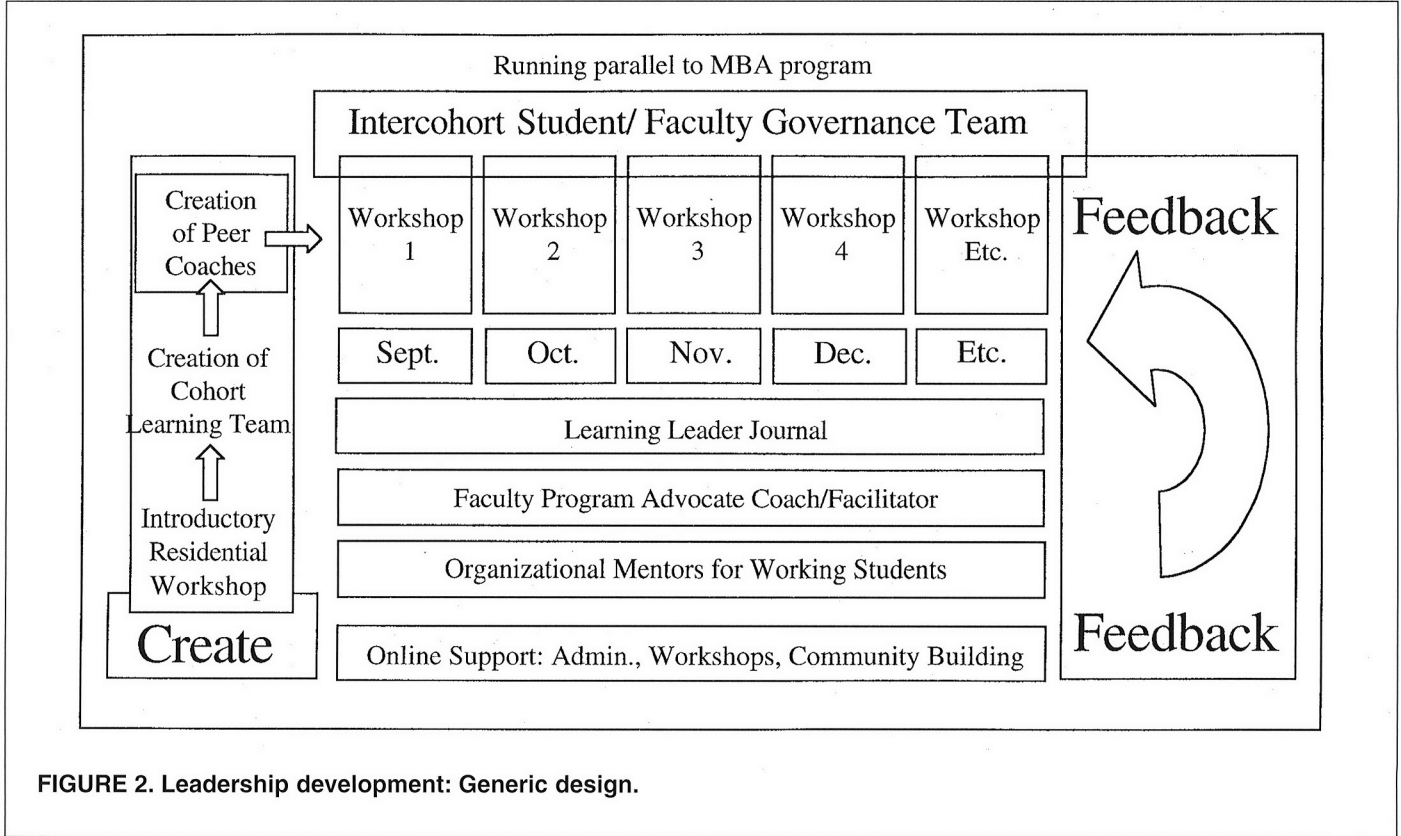
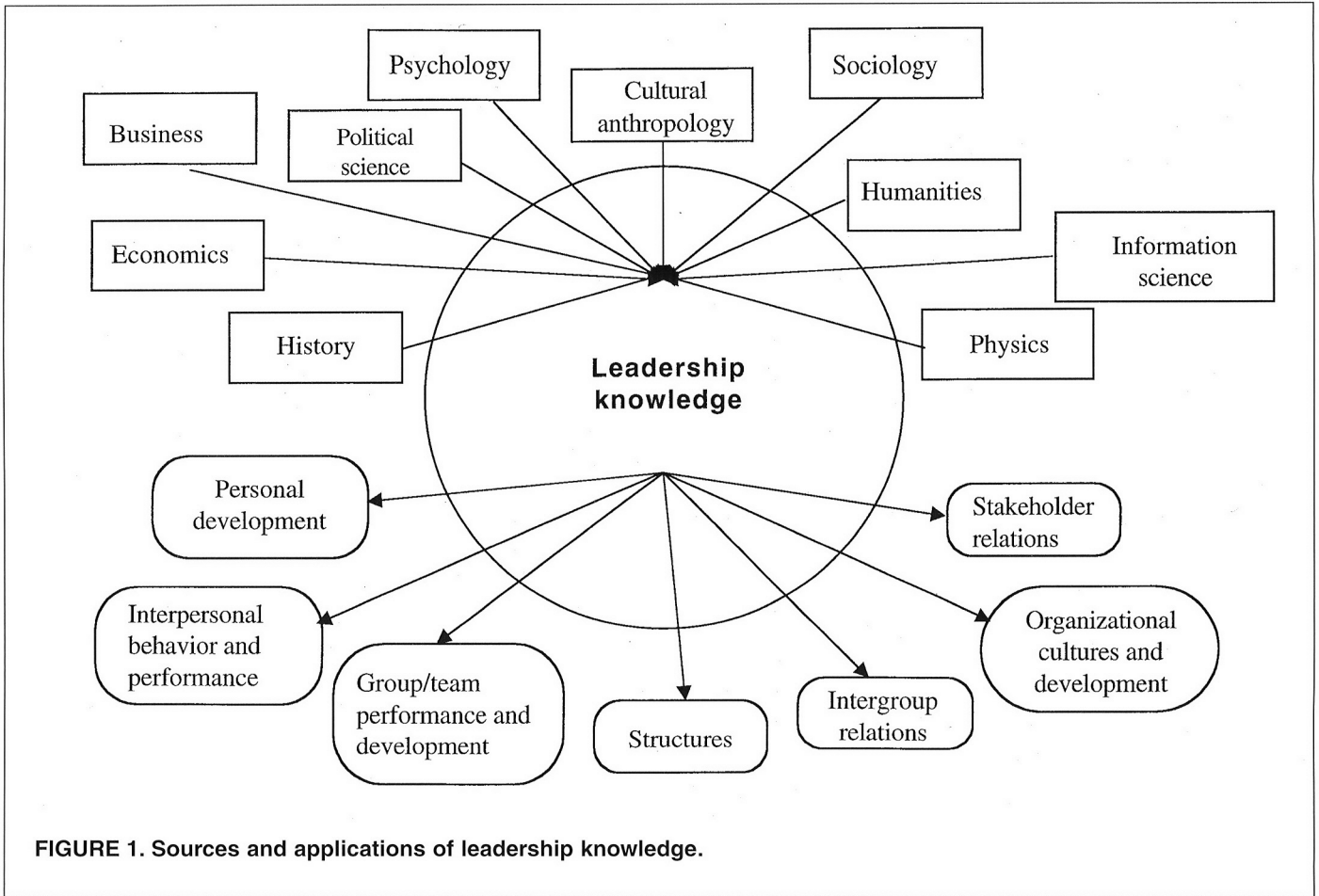
No other professional field so dismisses practice as a necessary component of teaching and learning. Business schools, however, have desperately, and foolishly, attempted to create a coin with only one side.

### **The Other Side of the Coin: Making Leadership Development Integral to Business Schools**

In this article, I propose an integrative model that acknowledges the various sources of leadership knowledge and their many applications (see Figure 1). The multidisciplinary nature of leadership knowledge is considerable. Because of the expansive nature of the discipline of leadership, more varied approaches may be required to bring relevancy into the training of leaders. Therefore, the orthodoxy of limiting learning from a single discipline taught entirely within a single school is unacceptable.

### **Graduate Leadership Model Proposed**

In Figure 2, I present one model of leadership development at the graduate level. The model, which includes various elements of support and multiple



opportunities for self-analysis, is based on the PROBE methodology developed by Nirenberg (1994). This method requires students to create a project that is completed at the end of their studies and uses classroom time to explore aspects of individual, team, and organizational behavior in action. A T-group (or community) environment is established. Part-time graduate students must participate in intensive on-campus residencies and, through extensive journal readings and with the help of organizational mentors in their work places, are expected to apply what they learn for testing their interpersonal effectiveness.

There are four supporting pieces to the development process, which gives each participant encouragement and sources of constructive feedback. First, a faculty-student committee plans and evaluates experiences, content focus, requirements, and outcomes. After an intensive initial residency, each participant is paired with a peer coach who is a member of the cohort but not necessarily in the same study team. Each participant also has access to at least one faculty member, often the program advocate, as well as an organizational mentor in the case of part-timers. Finally, each student keeps a structured journal (see Nirenberg, 1998) that provides a place both to reflect on lessons and experience and to keep responses to inquiries relating to the content of leadership.

### Content

The content of leadership development programs is immense. Two general approaches are needed to accommodate younger, less experienced participants and older, more experienced ones. In Figure 3, I present a general guide on how experience influences the content focus and relevance to participants. Age and experience are not always the deciding factors. Along the left side of the figure, I present the steps taken in a successful managerial career, from the entry level to top management. Corresponding to the loci of leadership are the major challenges that the learner will face. The right-hand column indicates learning enhancements and the focus of practices

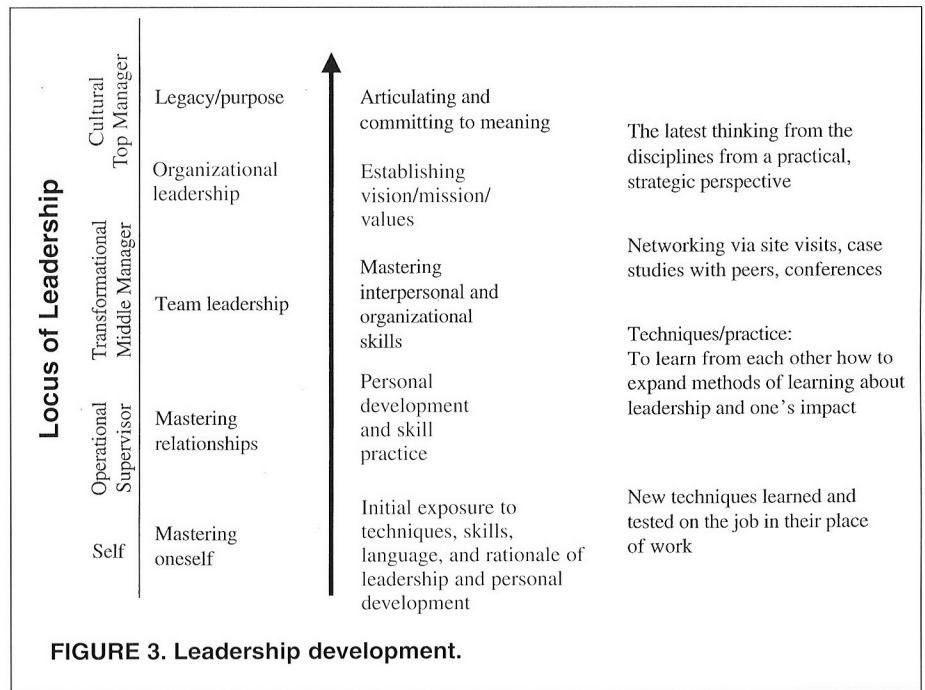


FIGURE 3. Leadership development.

addressed in the leadership development program.

Each of the five levels of development, from mastering oneself to achieving a legacy/purpose, requires students to analyze their own needs and goals within a traditional business framework of operations extending to top manager (locus of leadership). In such a program, existing nomenclature should be blended with that familiar to advanced leadership development at the graduate level to provide an easy transition. Within such a framework, faculty members may choose an appropriate depth of study in one or more of the five domains of leadership: intrapersonal, interpersonal, team, organizational, and societal. This approach is based on French and Bell's (1990) intervention strategies for organizational development practitioners.

A definition of leadership must be established before it can be developed. Some schools of business closely align leadership development and management education, which results in definitions such as "the preparation that one receives in learning the content in an MBA program." A graduate can assume a position in middle management and, presumably, supervise, manage, or lead whatever subordinates he or she is assigned. Leadership is simply the instrumental application of acquired knowledge.

Reporting on the conclusions of a longitudinal study (cited in Seligman, 2002, p. 164), the Aspen Institute stated that "during the two years of business school, the surveyed students became more—not less—dedicated to the 'importance of shareholder value.'" In such an environment, how is leadership defined? Is it merely the ability to have subordinates perform well in the interests of an unidentified "shareholder?" Does a lion tamer "lead" the lion through the burning hoop? In another view, based on the assumption that society values shareholder return as its prepotent purpose and relies on a hierarchical chain of command to hold human resources solely in service to that goal, leadership development becomes unnecessary or an exercise in human alchemy. In this possibly cynical definition, leadership means getting people to do what the leader wants them to do and liking it.

Leadership remains a concept about which everyone is an expert, but no two people define it quite the same way. A more contemporary definition of leadership includes the idea of choice by followers who are not just subordinates. This view embraces the personal, informed, willingness to follow rather than merely comply; a consciousness of doing the right thing rather than just the expected thing; and the idea that there is a meaningful and worthwhile goal

besides shareholder value toward which everyone is working. In this view, leadership signifies informed consent rather than a function dependent on possession of legitimate power bestowed by the organization.

### Taking Business Programs to a New Level

The MBA degree, as the flagship of schools of business, has been under attack for some time. Such criticisms focus on curricular issues, such as the typical program's increasing irrelevance (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), as well as the fact that MBA programs do not offer leadership development. If business schools are to remain credible sources of future business leaders, they must change immediately or see their market for leadership development turn to consultants and other schools.

By following these guidelines, administrators can encourage the creation of substantive, credit-bearing leadership development programs in busi-

ness schools as an enhancement to the MBA degree. In this article, I proposed a sample program that could lead to either a "major" focus, a stand-alone degree, or a parallel, substantial, but noncredit track that would help MBA students become lifelong practitioners of leadership skills.

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