The Existential Leadership Question: When Is It Time to Move On?

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Academic leadership roles are challenging, and no one should occupy them for too long. Of course, what represents "too long" is ill-defined. We all outgrow our capacity to lead, create change, and inspire followership. One of the biggest unknowns for most leaders is knowing when it is time to leave—whether that means returning to a faculty position, departing for a new role, changing careers, or retiring. Occasionally, it is obvious because a contract is not renewed or health or family issues compel one to step aside. There are also times when leaders exit because they become exhausted or frustrated. Disenchantment and fatigue are clear indicators that it is time to go and that the leader has likely stayed for too long. If you are tired of the work, the community you are leading likely has similar feelings about you.

Many otherwise impactful leaders stay in these roles too long and their effectiveness wanes over time, whether they know it or not. So how do successful leaders discern when to move on before their mindset sours or their abilities and energy diminish? There is no simple formula, but there are notable signs of leadership fatigue.

Recognizing leadership fatigue

Self-reflection about one's fit with the purpose, roles, and responsibilities of their position, which often fade from their attention, is a useful continual exercise for all leaders. As I emphasize in my recent book, *Substance over Style: A Field Guide to Leadership in Higher Education*, "Effective

leaders identify and address key institutional challenges and mobilize the community to pursue bold aspirations" (p. 6). To do so, leaders regularly challenge the status quo and advance the department, college, or institution toward meaningful strategic change. Effective leaders inspire continuous improvement by asking tough questions, pushing expectations, and creating a culture of community, achievement, pride, and productive restlessness.

At some point, however, leaders become too comfortable in their roles, and their drive to move the institution forward gradually diminishes. Arthur Brooks, a Harvard professor and expert in leadership and happiness, suggests that waning ability and drive are inevitable, although the timing and symptoms may vary among individuals. Indeed, it may be triggered by aging, a generational disconnect associated with emerging technologies or nascent academic fields, or having spent too much time in the same or similar positions. It is not all about age; young leaders may also devolve to this place. The net effect is an organization that settles into a comfort zone much like a well-seasoned rocking chair, familiar and comfortable but no longer able to rock. At that point, productive restlessness transitions to complacency, undermining the vitality of the academic enterprise, which depends on creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit for its success. David Frum of *The Atlantic* (2024) compares gradually diminished leadership to the photodegradation of artworks: "The colors remain present; they just become less vivid."

This subtle loss of vibrancy is a signal that it is time for new perspectives, fresh energy, a paradigm shift—that is, new leadership. Many leaders miss those signals and outlast their effectiveness. Self-comfort, self-deception, and a focus on past accomplishments may overwhelm their capacity for honest self-reflection and ability to continue to inspire progress. The implications can be perilous for the institution and leader.

Authentic leaders engage in honest self-reflection to discern that it is time to step aside and welcome new leadership. Former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the world's youngest female head of government when initially elected, took many by surprise when she abruptly announced her decision to step down after five and a half years in office rather than pursue another term. Her thoughtful comments channel deep and honest self-reflection and should inspire the next generation of leaders, including those of us in higher education, to know when it is time to pass the baton to "a fresh set of shoulders." She stated, "I am not leaving because it is hard . . . I am leaving because with such a privileged role comes responsibility—the responsibility to know when you are the right person to lead, and also when you are not . . . You can be your own kind of leader—one who knows when it is time to go."

Why do some leaders overstay their effectiveness?

There are many reasons why some higher education leaders outlast their effectiveness: lack of self-awareness that the tide has turned, enjoyment of the perks of the position and an unwillingness to let them go, or simply becoming comfortable with the status quo when no one is pushing them to move on. Some become accustomed to positions of authority and the satisfaction of being part of the inner leadership circle. In a recent interview in *The Atlantic*, Brooks suggests that, for some, position and accomplishments define their entire identity, and they are unable or unwilling to give that up, even if their effectiveness has diminished. Such attachment to professional identity can lead to emotional challenges when individuals finally choose or are forced to step aside.

Some leaders crave a glorious legacy and believe that continuing in their position will cement that legacy. As Brooks emphasizes, however, the best way to secure one's legacy is through a "heroic end," such as stepping aside to make room for others. Ironically, persisting in a leadership position past one's prime is counterproductive to that purpose and actually undermines one's legacy.

How long can higher education leaders expect to serve effectively?

Every situation and leader is different. Nevertheless, the most impactful leaders might expect to remain engaged and effective for approximately eight to 12 years. Clearly, there are many exceptions to this rough range of effective leadership service.

Given its breadth and the fact that each situation is unique, why suggest a ballpark range at all? The reason is that most, but not all, leaders who stay in their position at the same institution for eight to 12 years or so have a high probability of settling into the comfort-zone dilemma described above. Approaching 10 or more years of impactful leadership should trigger all college and university leaders to make extra efforts to conduct a deep and honest self-reflection about their potential for continued effectiveness in that role. This search for self-awareness is not about desiring to continue in a leadership position but rather about whether one still has the energy, ideas, and drive necessary to inspire followership and advance the institution. Candid input from trusted colleagues and supervisors will aid that assessment. Some will determine that they remain invested, motivated, and hungry for further efforts aimed at continued improvement. Others will no doubt learn, as did Prime Minister Ardern, that it is time to exercise true leadership and step aside. Remember, we are all replaceable.

Departing gracefully

How one leaves a leadership position is as important as how one begins a new role. Departing gracefully and in a timely manner is respectful and in the best interests of the individual and the community. It requires careful planning and communication with supervisors, direct reports, close colleagues, and perhaps even selected donors or alumni. Too often, sudden (and sometimes spiteful) leadership departures serve only to create organizational angst and distractions that ultimately diminish the status of the departing leader. If one leaves under less-than-ideal circumstances, it's best to get over your issues and move on to whatever is next. No one really cares about petty grievances.

Departing really does mean stepping away. It is professional and courteous to blend into the shadows to create space for new leaders to establish their voices and exert their influence. Resist the temptation to publicly second-guess decisions from the person who replaced you. Perhaps you would do things differently. Remember, however, that's why you stepped down: it was time for new directions and a fresh set of decisions. Authentic leaders understand that stepping back is necessary for the institution to move forward.

Finally, successful leaders understand that stepping aside, especially in their prime, is not the end of the line but rather an opportunity for a new beginning. While emerging leaders may have new ideas and embrace innovations, many departing leaders have accrued experience and wisdom that they can and should pass on to others through mentoring. As Brooks so eloquently states, "the mark of great leadership is what happens after leaders leave the scene."

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