

# Servant Leadership for Emerging International Higher Educational Institutions

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## Abstract

In this article, I present a spectrum of views on servant leadership in higher education administration specifically in context of emerging universities. The article states the importance of servant leadership as a model to encourage excellence in leadership and to take fulfilment of service roles beyond quantitative boundaries imposed in research and teaching. This article also covers the complex realities of the emerging universities and their emerging role in the development of education in the region.

## Introduction

I will start this article with a statement that sums up my view on leadership - “to be served is a delight, but to serve others for me is nothing less than a divine deed.”

Academics in modern research universities are under constant pressure to publish more; otherwise, they'll get perished ([Hynes, 2010](#); [Munigal & Achala, 2016](#)). This why a highly published research leader will provide advice on the trade secrets to boost the publication number by increasing the research collaborations ([Morales, Grineski, & Collins, 2017](#); [Saat & Salleh, 2010](#)). In modern academic environments, there are several means to increase research outputs, leading to long work hours and, at times, having to develop excellent interpersonal skills for creating output driven collaborative networks, internal and external to the host institution. While, collaborations do help in academic leadership roles, they alone are not enough to gain excellence in leadership.

Leadership quality measurement takes more than a quantitative assessment of research output, as the measures and means are equally important to reach the required set of goals. I would be skeptical to see a leader who claims loudly on their leadership abilities but cannot see the fundamental human values. Leadership is nothing less than a selfless attitude to the academic profession, leaving your interest and dedicating yourselves for the good of others ([Farnsworth, 2007](#)). It's not for everyone; clearly, the sacrifices the leader make may never be appreciated, but as Provost Prof Adesida Ilesanmi says, “the reward is in the heaven”; this is quite a compelling statement in the context of higher education leadership. Even in the toughest of times, the leader is expected to keep the morale of his team high and implement a vision to turn things around. No matter how great the efforts a leader puts in his role, true leadership will always require critical analysis of the situations to provide an environment that allows people to grow in the toughest of the times ([Welch, 2000](#)).

I have met several types of leaders, working in different academic settings, and every time, it has been a learning experience. I work closely with several chairs of departments or dean or director of academic institutes, and every time, you are faced with a new leadership variant. There are obvious models that won't work in a modern international university, such as father or mother figure leadership, those that put all their energy in fighting incoming issues, those who take it as a role that doesn't go beyond a set of rules, those who take the job on a temporary basis waiting for someone to take it over, those who want to micromanage every aspect, and finally those who want to make everyone happy delaying those difficult decisions ([Dean, 2014](#); [Iken, 2005](#)). There are also other successful model leaders who have a common characteristic of having an attitude of exemplary service to the profession. The difference I see is responsibility, passion, commitment, and a selfless attitude, who can set long-term vision and priorities to build the never-ending future.

In academia, people often rise through the ranks, naturally from being a postdoc to professor, and it is a tiring journey for many. The tables turn dramatically as and when you become that administrator you complain a lot about; now, as a new department chair or dean, you realise you would be in the spotlight for deeds gone wrong anytime ([Schuh, 2004](#); [Seagren, Creswell, Wheeler, ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, & Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1993](#)). Everyone should understand that being a professor is one thing and being an administrative professor an entirely different thing. Having said this, the difference, I believe, is that of taking more responsibility for what you say and how you behave with a primary interest in the progress of the department and its faculty.

Human behaviour has several intangibles that a leader must develop, knowing various dynamics of interpersonal relationships, being that supporting individual who is down to earth, the one who is available to listen, who can liaise with senior administrators, to be that person who upholds high values, and to be that person who can take stern actions at the right time, all of which requires several leaps in intellectual and emotional growth. Recognising the importance of human emotions is a critical aspect of leadership, the importance of which is often underestimated by bad leaders ([Ashkanasy, Zerbe, & Härtel, 2002](#); [Fox & Spector, 2002](#); [Zineldin & Hytter, 2012](#)). In modern universities, the faculty and research students fall under constant pressure to publish more in high-quality journals and conferences, find new funding, write proposals, build industry collaborations, participate in policy developments, and travel, making the life of individuals stressful. Adding to this natural pressure can be the inability of the leaders to listen, understand, and comprehend the problems faced by the faculty and students. Underestimating the emotional dynamics of the faculty members that can be expressive and non-expressive can be one of the biggest leadership mistakes.

### **The not so experienced leader**

Leaders come in all forms and ages, the young and the old - all have a story to tell and contribute. The scenario of more young leaders emerging in academia is driven by the rise of

new global universities ([Salmi, 2013](#)). In the last decades, the number of universities across the globe that dream to be internationally competitive has increased, creating many more leadership positions at all levels of the university system. The growth in academia is usually slow, relative to the corporate world; it takes longer periods of time to reach the leadership ranks. However, this is changing dramatically, as in modern universities the solutions to the problems and challenges are output driven within limitations of time that often require the leader to generate a high level of understanding of information technologies and to understand the millennials' mindset and issues ([Carrاهر, 2016](#)). The senior leaders struggle to keep up in pace with such developments.

The young leaders apparently lack the experience to foresee a solution to a problem as it comes, which is not different from senior leaders; however, they are perceived less likely to be seen in the same light ([Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013](#)). The number of variables and unknowns in the globally competitive academic space are much more than what was present a decade ago; that puts these perceptions to rest. There is a gradual and distinct positive shift in leadership thinking in academia from that driven by experience to that driven by abilities and results.

The leader is always on the move; the energy is finite, so is time and money. We live in a world of increasing constraints and changing international dynamics, and to adapt to the changes in perfection require infinite energy, time, and money. This contradiction of aims and means to achieving it makes the leadership a challenging and a critical element in organisational growth and its quest for international excellence. This is where the experience of a leader plays a significant role - how to adapt to change and have a visionary approach to the ways and means of implementing the institutional goals. Can young leaders survive in such dynamics? Possibly, they might fail, but the ones that are truly leadership material rarely give-up. They are like the phoenix, always having a rebirth and a new life. The more important question though is the university's ability to provide support and an environment for them to excel ([Cauthen, 2016](#)).

### **The complex realities of young university**

One of the greatest priorities of an ambitious young university is to build a reputation in a short span of time ([Altbach & Balán, 2007](#); [Teferra, 2017](#)). I have even heard from some of the non-academics saying we need to be in the top 50 in the next five years. To have realistic expectations requires people with great visions, from the department chairs to the provost. I have seen this to be a major challenge in start-up projects. It's never about the number of years in experience; it is the quality and brilliance of the individual's experience that talks louder in such complex and challenging environments.

Some of the major challenges in a new university are to do with the infrastructure development, hiring and promotion of right-minded high-quality faculty members, recruitment of top notch students, selection and promotion of level-headed academic administrators, getting the right set of visionary leaders in the management, and the continued long-term significant political or/and

financial support. All these are challenging and equally important; however, the academic and administrative leadership is the central pinning aspect that binds the multiple dimensions. Servant leadership principles are more relevant than ever in a new university than an established one; that includes priorities on service to others, to be a negotiator, create an environment for problem solving, taking responsibility at all levels, provide emotional support to the people, realise that means are as important as goals, to live in the present and have a vision for future, be all right with paradoxes and dilemmas, create an impact in society, practice the values that govern servant leadership, and finally mentor others towards becoming the next servant leaders ([Dean, 2014](#)).

Reflections and self-critiquing are an essential element of leadership, and they form the invaluable assets for the growth of the university culture ([Looney & Looney, 2009](#); [Trow, 1985](#)). The distinguishing feature I find in good leaders is their ability to dig deeper into the critical analysis deriving from reflections of their actions and connecting it with the realities of the future. I find that great leaders can make the tangential and vertical connections of ideas across the broad spectrum of directions with ease. The ability to make tough decisions connected with people and organisation, such as a layoff, even by providing the required support for a smooth exit for the employee would more likely never have a full reconciliation; however, the leader must act on the greater good of the institution and its people, making the right choices on leadership changes and organisational changes. These tough decisions test the true colour of the leader as a service leader, who cares about the well-being of the institution and its people.

### **Language and cultural issues**

Building an institutional culture for adapting to highly demanding requirements of international competitiveness in today's academic world requires organisations to speak in a single language of thought and vision ([Douglas Toma, 2005](#)). This is more easily said than done, as the elements of an implementation of the university's vision and mission run deep within the organisation. The academic administrators at any level must have an exceptional commitment and belief in the vision of the university and need to have the same degree of trust towards their colleagues. The role of department chairs is critical in this sense to listen and to be sensitive to the faculty concerns and provide all the support needed for them to grow within the realms of the university vision laid out to them. Further, the chairs must develop their vision plans for the department that align with the vision of the University in consultation with the Dean, the provosts, and other senior leadership members. The language of communication is as important as its context and sincere efforts and goodwill to drive the change.

In universities around the world, it is now accepted that the scientific communication is English ([Tardy, 2004](#); [Thanky, Thanky, English, & Jamnagar, 2012](#)). In a non-English speaking country, the influence and impact of local languages in scientific communications are reducing significantly ([Ren & Rousseau, 2004](#)) and non-existent in many parts of the world. This has more than a need driven by requirements of global competitiveness in scientific excellence and

reputation of the university. Many universities in China have made this transition in the last 20 years, and their research is now visible to the rest of the world, making them internationally competitive with some of the top universities in the world. Russian universities have yet to make the transition, and the reluctance to adopt English in education and scientific communication has slow progress compared with Chinese universities. The universities in Kazakhstan are in the early stages of this debate, with an exception of Nazarbayev University leading the way as a model institution to this change.

As a case study, I will mainly, highlight the universities in Kazakhstan, with ambitious plans to grow and excel. I will isolate the flagship project of Nazarbayev University (NU) from the rest. Leaving aside NU, the challenges faced by the other universities in Kazakhstan include the inability to attract internationally competitive faculty and low faculty salaries that hinder all other aspects of institutional growth. Further, the language of communication is in Kazakh or Russian and rarely in English. In some universities, students get exposed to English education through international visiting professors or exchange programs. The quality and quantity of scientific publications are little, and a change in this requires the universities to break the language barrier. They need to be led by inspirational leaders at all levels of the organisation to turn the tide to a positive story. The responsibilities of an institution, such as Nazarbayev University, in assisting the other universities in the region to help make this transition are more important than ever in the history of Kazakhstan. I would like to extend the idea of service leadership, not just to reflect academic leaders serving others, but a flagship university, such as Nazarbayev University, providing its services to the rest of the universities in the region to make the major transitions in building a robust and internationally relevant institutional culture.

Flagship universities provide many opportunities for the growth of quality standards and benchmarks for other universities in the region. The effectiveness and efficiency of growth are closely tied to the ability of the leaders to be visionaries who are sensible and flexible to the needs of its stakeholders, upholding values and being an excellent servant who stays with the stakeholders, rather than the commanding boss that the stakeholder wants to get away from.

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