The importance of leadership to society is growing. What indications do we have that this is the case? We certainly seem interested in the subject – a search on Amazon for books on leadership finds over 100,000 titles. And enormous effort goes into translating this knowledge into practice – Deloitte reports $15.5 billion was spent on leadership training in the U.S. in 2013. And yet numerous polls indicate widespread and chronic dissatisfaction with our institutions and leaders. So what is the disconnect between our knowledge and training about leadership, and its application? Is it a lack of leaders? Are leaders are not producing the transformative changes that we need? Or is it that our expectations about leadership are misguided?

The root problem is that the mental models most of us have about leadership are wrong. We claim to know a lot about leaders – their traits, behaviors, and subject matter knowledge. But what do we really know about the process of leadership? We start from the unfortunate position that there is no agreed upon definition of leadership in the scholarly community. In fact many of the books on leadership don’t define the concept beyond “I know it when I see it.” The term is applied too broadly and mistakenly used interchangeably with the word leader. Over the past 30 years the societal view and use of the term ‘leadership’ can be summed up in three categories:

a. A great person, with desired characteristics, influencing others to do as s/he wishes, in order to achieve organizational goals that reflect excellence.

b. Leadership is synonymous with excellence (e.g., thought leadership; #1 in your industry).

c. The collective senior management of an organization.

But every description outlined above is erroneous. We need a better definition and model of leadership. The most useful explanation comes from Joseph Rost who defined leadership as a process:

An influence relationship, among leaders and followers, who intend real changes, that reflect their mutual purposes.¹

There are four critical components of this definition, all of which must be present for a relationship to be called leadership:

a. The relationship is based on influence, not coercion or positional authority (although all members of the community do not exercise equal influence).

b. There’s more than one person (the leader) in the relationship and the participants in the community are constantly shifting roles between leading and following. Because leadership is a process of engagement, leaders alone don’t do leadership and active followers don’t do followership – both are doing the work of leadership.

c. Change that is transformative is at the heart of leadership, and leaders and followers are purposeful in their intention to pursue changes in the organization. And since significant change does not occur continuously, leadership is conditional and episodic.

d. The desired changes cannot reflect only what leaders want. Because leadership is what both leaders and followers do together, their common purposes must be developed jointly and socially constructed over time (this does not mean harmonious relationships, or the absence of conflict, or defaulting to the least common denominator solution).

Stated another way, leadership is a community activity, not an individual endeavor. Leadership resides not in individuals, but in the relationships among people. This definition of leadership applies across different disciplines, professions, and environments. However, it can’t be understood or learned generically and it’s helpful to study leadership at work in particular contexts.

Higher education is in many ways a challenging environment for leadership activities. The ecosystem is characterized by: senior administration and other positions vested with significant responsibility having to work effectively with multiple constituencies to effect successful change; shared governance between faculty and administrators (e.g., faculty decide which students and faculty to admit to the community, and what students are expected to learn); a culture that resides in a decentralized environment, yet demands consultation, transparency, and in selected circumstances, collective decision-making; some core values that focus on the individual (e.g., academic freedom, tenure); traditions that matter a lot; and, long time horizons.

Given this set of characteristics, it should be no surprise that universities today don’t function much differently than they did 500 years ago – and they are remarkably enduring. Of the 75 institutions in the western world that existed in 1520, and remain essentially in the same form today, 61 are universities.²

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One way to view universities is that they are places of constant change – a transient student population; a relentless pace of new ideas, disciplines, and innovation; and, market behavior that is best described as hyper-competitive (e.g., recruiting the best faculty and students; securing grants; publishing). Yet, most of this perpetual change is the summation of individual activities. Significant structural changes to the organization are quite difficult – e.g., changing the core curriculum; awarding degrees based on competencies rather than credit hours; closing or merging an academic unit; becoming a global university (if we could figure out what that means); or, widespread integration of technology to support teaching and learning.

When these kinds of substantial structural changes to the higher ed organization are desired, leadership offers the only possibility for change that is viewed as legitimate and accepted by the community. Authority rarely enables transformation for the reasons articulated earlier (e.g., shared governance). That does not mean that authority relationships (management) do not have a place in higher ed – they do, and the effectiveness of the organization to support its core missions of research, education, and service depends on really good management. Both leadership and excellent management are necessary – the goal is to ensure that these processes support the intellectual mission and unique environment of a university.

**Problems with Traditional Leadership Development**

Leadership is a community activity, not an individual endeavor – it is not the province of elites leading others to do their will. Rost extrapolates this to leadership development which he states is not the same as leader development.³ If you accept this premise then leadership development should be different than is commonly practiced today. So what should change?

First, the point of intervention is wrong – the individual vs. the organization. Traditional development programs typically target ‘fast trackers’ and people who aspire to positions of greater responsibility – these programs conflate leader development with leadership development. But if leadership is a community activity, and both leaders and followers do leadership, then leadership development should be targeted more broadly during periods of change. It should be directed towards: a critical mass of employees with high influence; who want to engage in leadership activities both as leaders and followers; and who are focused on changing the organization through the development of mutual purposes.

Second, people learn best when their learning is rooted in the context in which they work. This is particularly true for leadership development where your work environment allows you to make better sense of concepts and theories when you see them in action, rather than through case studies of other organizations.

Third, how do we know what leader behaviors, traits and styles are beneficial in all environments and should be taught? The short answer is we don’t – there is no agreement in academia or the world of work. Thus we need to focus training more on two core themes: self-awareness (the foundation of leader development); and on relationships and influence processes (the foundation of leadership development).

Fourth, changing small but important aspects of ourselves is difficult and takes a long time. This is the Achilles heel of the extraordinarily well done programs at Harvard, the Aspen institute, the Center for Creative Leadership and other highly regarded providers. It takes an extended period of time (at least a year with on-going experimentation, feedback, practice) to improve skills and behaviors and let them settle in. The participants’ ability to translate what they learned in class, and are motivated to put into practice, evaporates when they return to work because they lack the focus and supportive environment that the training session provided.

Lastly, the cohort format allows for learning beyond the instructors and the curriculum – the participants learn from each other. In programs that last a few days some of this occurs, but it is not sustained after they return to work. If the cohort is formed from the organization’s own employees, the opportunity increases to forge productive relationships that endure.

**RiceLeaders Program**

Rice University is going through one of the two biggest periods of change in its one hundred year history. The RiceLeaders program was designed to support the transformational change processes needed to implement Rice’s Vision for the Second Century (V2C).

Using Rost’s definition, leadership processes are more prevalent during times of great change. Thus leadership development programs are an important component of institutional transformation. The premise of the RiceLeaders program was that if we improve the collective leadership competence of a critical mass of people with high influence roles, immerse them in the strategy of the university, and get them to use their persuasion capabilities to contribute more to the changes we intend together, then we ought to have better outcomes for the V2C.

The first goal of the RiceLeaders program was to improve the collective leadership competence of the university. To accomplish this we needed a critical mass of people with high influence roles, broadly dispersed across the campus, to emerge from the program with a higher level of competence to engage in leadership processes. The cumulative effect should have a major impact on the university.

The second goal was to deeply connect the participants to the vision and strategy of the organization. Specifically we focused on helping the participants answer three questions:
a. Why are we doing all of this? What is the case for the change? We’ve been enormously successful for a century so isn’t the university pursuing a potentially dangerous path? You must be able to answer these questions for yourself in order to interpret and influence others in the process of developing mutual purposes.

b. How will Rice be different ten years from now if we’re successful at realizing all of the benefits from all of the changes we intend? We are not seeking a precise or quantitative answer. Rather each of us has our own way of describing the institution’s qualities and place in higher education. Developing a long-term view of success serves as a compass for our near-term actions and interpretations for others – in other words, ‘that’s the general direction we are heading.’

c. What does this mean for me? This question goes to the heart of how each participant sees their contribution to the organization and whether some small changes in alignment, and how they contribute, might be good for both them and the university.

The third goal of the RiceLeaders program was to enlist participation in the institution’s change processes in both the participants’ current professional sphere and across the university.

The last goal was to knit the university together. High ambition, and the transformational change to make it happen, requires a network of productive relationships across the organization that can’t be prescribed or predicted in advance – but creating an environment where they can form naturally is the goal.

Who Participates in RiceLeaders?

We postulated that 10% of Rice’s employees (both faculty and staff) have significant influence capacity based on their role, position, expertise, reputation, personality, and relationships across the campus. Identifying these individuals was a critical success factor for the program.

We defined a critical mass of participants as half the population of ‘influencers’ – 5% of the workforce. Which specific employees constituted the 5% was less important than correctly identifying the pool from which to select participants since our goal was to raise the collective leadership competence of the organization – not focus on an elite set of individuals. Traditional leadership development programs typically target people who aspire to positions of greater responsibility. While RiceLeaders has many of these traditional participants, it also has people with great influence but different personal aspirations.

The cohorts are diverse and broadly represent the campus. Each cohort of 25-30 participants is half faculty, half staff. Most of the senior administration of the university goes through the program with the exception of the President and the Provost. Because the program is steeped
in the university’s strategy, their direct participation might hinder the open, candid and critical discussions that are necessary, and thus we find other ways to involve them in the program.

Participation in a program like RiceLeaders is difficult. Prior to enrolling, each potential participant is asked to think through the personal commitments they would have to make in order to have a positive experience. These included:

a. Are you interested in being better prepared to lead when opportunities arise, and willing to do what’s necessary to improve? This means getting feedback, experimenting with new behaviors, and practicing over an extended period of time.

b. Do you have a desire to engage in the leadership activities of Rice and willingness to your influence for this purpose?

c. Are you willing to commit to the time required? This program takes ten days over the course of an academic year – a lot of time for very busy people. Emergencies arise and teaching obligations must be met, but missing large chunks of the program not only hinders the participant’s development, but also other members of the cohort as they learn much from each other.

The Program Details

The curriculum consists of four modules delivered over one calendar year. Each module is two days long and they are spaced out few months. The modules are:

a. *Fundamentals of Leadership*. This module has two themes. The first gives everyone a basic understanding of the core concepts of leadership. The second theme focuses on the single most important aspect of leader development – self-awareness. We use various instruments to give participants feedback about themselves, identification of blind spots, how to interpret their results, and strategies for how to improve.

b. *Teams*. There is a considerable body of knowledge about how to make groups of people (e.g., teams, committees) work really well together. The effectiveness of how committees perform is so critical in the higher ed environment, yet their performance varies greatly. This module teaches participants the leadership processes that make groups of people work effectively together.

c. *Creativity*. This class uses aesthetic-based experiences to help participants perceive and make sense of change – in our case to create a shared understanding of Rice’s Vision for the Second Century. The class is designed to get at critical questions in novel ways that are hard to do by other methods of discourse – Why are we doing all of this? How will Rice be different ten years from now if we’re successful at realizing all of the benefits from all of the changes we intend? What does this mean for me?
d. Strategy Implementation. Universities are places of ideas. But implementation in an environment with shared governance, expectations for consultation and critical discourse, strong individual rights, comfort with ambiguity and low accountability, is hard. This class teaches the participants how to get stuff done in this environment while being respectful of the history, traditions, values, and culture of the institution.

In addition to the four modules, other activities are introduced over the course of the year in order to keep up each participant’s engagement in their own development, without overburdening them. These activities include:

a. Coaching. Everyone interacts several times with a Ph.D. organizational psychologist who coach executives full-time for a living. We have mostly used one-on-one coaching, but are experimenting with small group coaching.

b. Action Learning Project. Groups of five participants are assigned to a project delineated in a charter. The purpose is twofold. First, connect the participants to an important issue for the university and have them make recommendations for improvement. The second is to provide a vessel for individual learning (e.g., practice leading a team). The groups spend 12-16 hours over 2-3 months on the project and present their recommendations to the president and the provost.

c. Community Building Events. Three to five optional events over the course of the program focus on community building – not only within the cohort, but between past and present cohorts as all participants and alumni are invited. The events include seminars of topical interest (e.g., a not-for-profit executive describing a leadership experience), personal development (e.g., a poet discussing workplace life), or a social function (e.g., a barbecue followed by a basketball game).

Does this Work?

If it takes at least a year to make small but important changes in our leadership skills and behaviors, and to let new practices become routine, then it takes several years after the completion of the program to evaluate the impact on both the individual and the institution. It is only in retrospect and with some distance that RiceLeaders can be evaluated. [We have used this framework in other organizations over the past 15 years to know that the basic concepts are effective over time for both the institution and the individual participants.]

In the Spring of 2011, three years after the first cohort of RiceLeaders finished the program, focus groups were conducted with about one-third of the first 100 participants (to date, 150 people have completed the program). The results were:

a. All participants learned new skills and behaviors that enhanced work performance.
b. Most participants gained a deeper understanding of Rice’s strategy. They could interpret events and actions taking place around the campus, even if they were not participating in them, and interpret those decisions for others.

c. While participants did not substantially change how they contributed to the university, they made some changes that allowed them to participate more and differently in the life of the university.

d. New work relationships were formed that were productive during and after the program concluded.