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Leadership Reckoning Underway

By Tom Kolditz, Ph.D., Brigadier General, U.S. Army (ret) and Principal and Managing Member, Saxon Castle LLC



Tom Kolditz, Ph.D.

The claims of most universities that they are developing students as leaders—claims often found in mission or vision statements—are usually false. The recognition of this failure has been labeled as the “Leadership Reckoning,” which was discussed at The University of Tampa’s TECO Energy Center for Leadership’s most recent Leadership Summit, “Leadership Reckoning: Making a Difference.” I had the honor of being the keynote speaker for this event. My talk described the poor performance of universities in developing leaders, and what to do about it. I go into this in detail in my book, [Leadership Reckoning: Can Higher Education Develop the Leaders We Need?](#) In 2021, the book was sent in triplicate to the provosts and presidents of the top 200 universities in the U.S. So began the reckoning.

I first became interested in this issue while founding the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University in 2015. I wanted to know the status of leader development across the country, so I hired a researcher to examine 50 universities that claimed they developed students as leaders or had such aspirations in their mission or vision statements. Her search included Ivy League schools, other private schools, state schools, and even a few community colleges. Her interviews with key university personnel were either in-person or by phone. The results were stunning. None—not one—of those universities had a systematic or effective approach to undergraduate student leader development. Not one offered comprehensive leader development to all students. Not one was using evidence-based development techniques common in industry. Not one had outcome measures or other metrics to confirm their effectiveness. Their claims were

unsupported by evidence or facts.

How could this be? We needed to know more. So, we hired a company that manages large, representative panels of Americans to examine what people think about the role of higher education in producing leaders. They found a majority of Americans (62%) believed that “students typically acquire the skills to lead during their time at university,” and 67% believed that “universities do a good job of preparing students for leadership.” In addition, 70% of people surveyed saw the development of leaders as “a core function of universities.” While we found little evidence of intentional leader development, these universities, nonetheless, enjoyed a good reputation as leader development institutions with parents and other members of the public. Could it be that the four-year undergraduate experience develops leadership capacity among graduates?

To answer this question, we looked at the four-year student experience (five graduate years for Ph.D. students) of 2,800 Rice students who did not participate in any leader development activities, and across time we measured several leadership related constructs, the best and most useful being leader identity. The measurement of leader identity focuses on people seeing themselves as leaders, having confidence in themselves to lead, understanding leader strengths, and intention to seek out leader roles. The results were crystal clear. There was no significant leader growth among graduates who were not involved in developmental programs. The measure was a flat line for undergraduates, and graduate students scored lower in leader identity over time.

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By contrast, the leader growth among students who experienced professional leadership coaching for a semester skyrocketed.

Thus, the notion that colleges produce leaders, in most instances, is an accepted yet unverified myth. What might allow the myth to perpetuate? One reason is that colleges and universities often do have shallow but visible leadership activities—speakers, retreats, teas, peer or amateur coaching, lunch-and-learns, TEDx talks and single session workshops. One might think the basis for these activities in universities would be carefully researched, and the outcomes would be objectively measured using validated instruments—the manifestation of intellectual honesty. Nothing could be further from the truth. We found no university that used primarily evidence-based techniques, and no outcome measures (other than process measures, like participation numbers, or popularity among students). There were no measures of leader growth. We coined a term for shallow, unmeasured leadership activities—“leadertainment.” Our conclusion was that most colleges and universities enjoy the myth of leader development, while modestly funding ineffective “leadertainment” activities. Some of the top universities in the world nonetheless promote shallow, ineffective processes with no professional attention to outcomes when developing students as leaders.

Why would universities not apply the same high standards to leader development as they do to their other first-rate activities? My book, [Leadership Reckoning: Making a Difference](#) goes into this in detail, but I’d like to highlight two prominent reasons.

Individual-Performer Cultures

First, universities are individual-performer cultures. They focus on individual student work and grades. Faculty are judged by their personal research, their teaching and their service to

the university. The practice of leadership in universities is simply not prominent in the dominant culture. I was a faculty member for 18 years, and my peers and I were proud of our independence from leaders. We saw leader influence to be related to administrative overreach. Even presidents and provosts are usually labelled as administrators rather than leaders, in deference to the collective faculty governance models seen in most universities.

Knowledge of Cutting-Edge Techniques

Secondly, I have found over 25 years developing leaders in universities that people—including most university faculty—are largely unaware of the level of sophistication that leader development has achieved in the past 10 years or so. The clear exception would be a small percentage of business school faculty. Most business schools sell executive development to business individuals and industry, and thus keep up with what works. But most faculty simply have little to no exposure to cutting-edge leader development processes and techniques during their research, teaching, and service, or anywhere else in the university. Untrained academic faculty are simply not equipped to develop students as leaders, and although some may provide mentoring, they can’t compete with professionally certified coaches and other leader development professionals in increasing students’ capacities to lead.

The definition of cutting-edge techniques changes rapidly in leader development, with the newest and most effective techniques burgeoning dramatically. For example, the leader development technique the Doerr Institute found to be most impactful is professional leadership coaching, which now overshadows corporate universities as a means of efficiently developing business leaders. According to a coaching industry report by Robin Waite, professional leadership coaching revenue grew 62% from 2019-2024. The number of certified coach practitioners worldwide surged from 71,000 in 2019 to 109,200 in 2022, indicating a robust 54% growth. Military personnel are showing up in significant quantities in coach

training courses, including the coach certification training at Rice University, Georgetown University, Columbia University, and at least 10 other schools. Yet in most cases, the coach training and individual coaching is directed solely outside the university to business, rather than focused on the development of typical undergraduate 4-year degree students.

Some readers may be wondering why I did not mention program costs as the reason universities don’t provide much in the way of leader development. Our work at the Doerr Institute found that leader development processes (for example, one-on-one professional leadership coaching) cost about 50% less per student than a traditional academic course costs. If a university is truly committed to developing the next generation of leaders, how could they not afford something half as expensive as something they already do? To understand the funding challenge perception, we also looked at the cost of leadership activities that are unlikely to cause leader growth. Speaker series, for example, have little to no potential for measurable leader development outcomes—a form of “leadertainment.” Yet it is common for universities to spend several hundred thousand dollars on leadership speakers per year—with no proven or measured outcomes. By comparison, such an investment could provide a semester of one-on-one professional leadership coaching for 60 to 100 students—each of them likely to show significant, measurable growth in their ability to lead. Eliminating non-impactful leader development activities—including, in some cases, academic leadership courses—and replacing them with highly effective development techniques is likely to reduce costs, not increase them.

Clearly, the decisions by universities on what development activities to support requires the ability to objectively measure leader development outcomes. Is that possible? Of course, it is. Individuals undergo measurable psychological changes as their confident leader identity forms, and those changes can be measured (pretest-posttest) using validated psychological instruments, confirming development effects.

Instruments tailored to measuring leader development, for example leader identity scales, can triangulate with self-reports and psychological instruments to create strong evidence of leader growth. Arguments that measuring leader development effects is too difficult, or that the effects don't emerge until years later, are no longer legitimate. If universities were to require existing programs to demonstrate their effectiveness beyond process measurement, there would be huge financial savings and significant improvements in the quality of leader development in universities.

The demand for high performing, ethical leaders in society has perhaps never been greater, but what qualifies as an excellent, or even adequate effort on the part of universities to create the next generation of leaders has shifted. For most, it will take a viewing student leader development as a core function and require the use of developmental strategies that employ professional people, use evidence-based practices, and work to achieve measured outcomes. That is now the standard for effective development. To do less, while claiming to develop leaders, is intellectually dishonest. Alternatively, schools could remove the goal of creating the next generation of

leaders from their mission and vision statements. Most boards of trustees and parents recognize the value of leader development and would probably object strenuously to dismissing those goals. This is precisely the disruption caused by the Leadership Reckoning movement. The resolution of the disruption is to actively embrace excellence, something universities do every single day, and they are more than capable to do it for students who intend to be leaders. The end state is a country that is far better led by its college graduates—a strategic contribution that would benefit us all.

About the author:

Tom Kolditz is principal at his leadership consultancy, Saxon Castle LLC. He was the founding director of the Ann and John Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University—the most comprehensive, evidence-based,

university-wide leader development program in the world. The Doerr Institute was recognized in 2019 as the top university leader development program by the Association of Leadership Educators. Prior to Rice, he taught as a professor

in the practice of leadership and management and director of the Leadership Development Program at the Yale School of Management.

Leadership in Action

By Christopher Stevens, one of the original four members who founded, developed and launched the Keurig Premium Coffee System and Associate Teaching Professor, University of Notre Dame Mendoza College of Business

Leadership... A lot has been written about it over the years. What makes a good leader? What makes a bad leader? Books, videos, and TED Talks on leadership cover the important topic. I have had the chance to be a leader as well as teach courses on leadership to more than 5,000 students.

As a Division 1 student athlete at the University of Notre Dame, I had the chance to see leadership in action on the basketball court, classroom and campus. One of the most influential leaders in my life was Father Theodore Hesburgh, or Father Ted as we knew him. He was born in Syracuse, New York in 1917. A graduate of Notre Dame, Father Ted was ordained a priest in 1943 into the Congregation of the Holy Cross. While he expressed interest in being a Navy chaplain during World War II, Father Ted earned his Ph.D. in Sacred

Theology in 1945 and began a career in teaching at the University of Notre Dame.

The president of Notre Dame, at the time, was Father John Cavanaugh. Father Cavanaugh quickly realized the special talents of Father Ted and appointed him as chair of the Department of Theology in 1948. A year later, he was appointed as executive vice president. Only three years later in 1952, Father Ted succeeded Father Cavanaugh as Notre Dame's 15th president at the age of 35.

Father Ted would go on and serve Notre Dame as its president for 35 years until he retired in 1987. During that time, he transformed Notre Dame from being known mostly as a football powerhouse into a research institution of higher learning while remaining competitive in sports. Moreover, U.S. presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan tapped

into his extraordinary leadership skills by appointing him to numerous councils including the U.S. Commission on Civil rights in the 1960s.

Someone once said: "A great leader does not build the business. A great leader builds an organization for it is the organization that builds the business." Notre Dame's founder in 1842, Father Sorin, declared that "this university will be one of the most powerful means for doing good in this country." Father Ted wanted to expand that to "the world." He realized that in order to do that he needed to build a strong team who would ensure



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that in his absence on politically appointed trips, the academy would continue to run smoothly.

Father Ted selected as his executive vice president, Father Edmund Joyce who also possessed strong leadership and organizational skills. As a result of his lifelong commitment to justice, human dignity, civil rights and more, Father Ted remains today the most decorated person in terms of honorary degrees with more than 150 degrees from all over the world.

Father Ted's philosophy on leading was simple. He stated: "The essence of leadership is vision. You cannot blow an uncertain trumpet." He also believed that "you don't make decisions because they are easy. You make them because they are right."

Anyone interested in how to be a good leader can read any number of books about Father Ted. There has also been an award-winning movie about Father Ted entitled simply "Hesburgh."

I have learned from several other great leaders like the late General and Secretary of State Colin Powell. COVID-19 took him from us two years ago but not before he established himself as one of the great leaders in the history of our country. When a White House fellow asked him in a press conference about what are the traits of a great leader, his answer was simple and direct: trust.

General Powell went on to state that great leaders take organizations past the point that the science of management says is possible and that great organizations have followed their leaders because they trust them. That trust has been built up through selfless service and that leaders are willing to give their organizations the tools they need to do their jobs and then are willing to work side by side and assume the same risks as their organizations. As he stated in a brief press conference: "Don't give them a job if you aren't going to give them the resources to get it done." He concluded his comments with: "So the essence of leadership is doing all that the science of management says is possible but then giving it that extra spark, so they will follow you, if only

out of curiosity."

Jack Welch was another great leader who I admire. A native of Salem, Massachusetts, Welch joined General Electric in 1960 after earning a degree in chemical engineering from the University of Massachusetts. After rising through the ranks of GE, Welch became the youngest chairman and CEO ever. Over the next decade, Welch streamlined GE's operations and product offerings with the philosophy: "If we aren't #1 or #2 in any product, service or category or we can't be within two years, we are going to sell it or shut it down."

During his tenure, GE's market capitalization grew from \$12 billion to \$410 billion. When asked in an interview what the keys to success were, he responded: "I think GE's understands its core competency. Its core competency is the development of people. And in the end, great people make great things happen. And involving all of them is really the answer. Any person at any level at GE has a chance. People have a chance to reach their dreams. We don't say our core competencies here are plastics or engines. If I have done anything over the past 20 years is make it a people factory".

Welch had pretty simple keys to leading and developing leaders: 1) Managing less is better; 2) Manage by creating a vision; 3) Lead, don't manage; 4) Instill confidence. Welch's prescription for leading change was: 1) Accept change; 2) Never stop thinking about change; 3) Review your agenda continuously. And for nurturing leaders? 1) Find leaders willing to swallow their egos; 2) Offer employees more responsibility and they will make better decisions; 3) More employee accountability = more employee productivity; 4) Nurture employees with the right values even if they don't always make their numbers.

Google is widely recognized as a top company for which to work. Not long ago, they asked their employees to "Build a Better Boss." In other words, to describe the characteristics they would like to see in their leaders. They came back with eight things: 1) Have a clear strategy and vision for the team; 2) Help employees with career development; 3) Express interest in all's success

and well-being; 4) Have technical skills so you can advise the team; 5) Be a good communicator and listen; 6) Be a good coach; 7) Be productive and results oriented; 8) Empower the team and don't micro-manage. My guess is with leaders practicing these guidelines, Google will continue to remain one of the most admired companies in America.

Finally, I have become a fan of Simon Sinek. He has several great presentations and interviews on leadership, including "Start with Why," "If you don't understand people, you don't understand business"; "Leaders Eat Last" and "Empathy". He tells great stories and is a sought-after speaker on leadership.

There are a lot of great leaders in this world. Nelson Mandela is widely regarded as a great leader. His father was a tribal elder and when, as a boy, Mandela would accompany him to tribal meetings, he noticed two things in particular that struck him. First, they always stay in a circle. There was no hierarchy. Second, his father was always the last to speak.

All great leaders need to learn how to sit in a circle... and be the last to speak.

About the author:

Christopher Stevens is the founder and CEO of CS 74 Ventures LLC, a holding company of 20+ initiatives in which Stevens has invested/owns with the commitment of donating at least 50% of the profits to charitable/social causes. Stevens retired from Keurig Inc. in May 2013 to teach as an adjunct professor in the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame and to pursue other business and charitable ventures. Stevens was responsible for all aspects of Keurig's Corporate Responsibility initiatives as part of GMCR's commitment to donate at least 5% of its pre-tax profits to environmental and social causes. Stevens was the keynote speaker at the first joint lecture series between The University of Tampa's TECO Energy Center for Leadership and Notre Dame's Hesburgh Lecture Series in Fall 2023.

An Elephant's Act of Compassion

By Bella L. Galperin, Senior Associate Director/TECO Energy Center for Leadership; Dana Professor, Management

It was a drizzly afternoon on the reserve in South Africa's Western Cape. From the distance across the open plain, a waterbuck found itself in danger, as a lioness closed in with silent determination. We sat silently in the jeep. Tension filled the air as the predator prepared to strike, her eyes fixed on the target, hind legs ready to sprint with deadly force.

But just as the fate of the waterbuck seemed sealed, an unexpected savior emerged from the bush. The ground moved under the thundering footsteps as the elephant appeared. In a breathtaking display of courage and compassion, the elephant, followed by a herd of four, charged the lioness making trumpeting sounds (a well-known call made by blowing through the trunk made during aggression and excitement) as a warning echoed across the plains.

Under the cover of noise and chaos, the waterbuck seized the opportunity to run away, escaping to safety as the lioness retreated reluctantly into the shadows.

In that fleeting moment, an extraordinary act of leadership and altruism unfolded. The elephant, with its sheer size and strength, became a guardian angel for the vulnerable waterbuck, offering protection in its time of need.

As the scene played out before my eyes, I was filled with exhilaration and reminded that even in the wilderness, empathy and bravery can prevail. As leaders, we can draw inspiration from the selfless actions of the elephant to make the world more compassionate. In that fleeting moment, an extraordinary act of leadership and altruism unfolded. The elephant, with its sheer size and strength, became a guardian angel for the vulnerable waterbuck, offering protection in its time of need. Given the recent research showing the benefits of leading with compassion, this is especially important for organizations today (Trzeciak et al., 2023).

My experience with the lioness, waterbuck and

elephants caused me to think about other aspects of leadership we can learn from the behaviors of wild animals. Five valuable lessons that we can learn from wild animals include:

Adaptability: Wild animals often face unpredictable environments and challenges. They demonstrate adaptability by adjusting their behaviors and strategies to survive and thrive. On that rainy late afternoon in early January, the lions may have been more active given they hunt more during storms as the noise and wind make it harder for the prey to see and hear them (WWF, 2024). Similarly, leaders need to be adaptable and pivot by adjusting their approaches to effectively achieve goals.

Communication: Many species of animals rely on complex communication systems to convey messages within their groups. Elephants use low-frequency rumbles, called infrasounds, that can travel more than a mile. According to Angela Stoeger, an elephant communication specialist at the University of Vienna, elephants vocalize using the same physical principles as we do, but their immense larynx produces very low notes that the human ear cannot detect (Hausheer, 2012). Did our elephant leader communicate with the other elephants to help with intimidating away the lioness? In the lion encounter, the elephant used verbal and non-verbal communication. That is, the elephant began to "run" (technically amble) quickly and trumpeted to chase away the lioness. Leaders can learn the importance of clear and effective communication from observing how animals use vocalizations, body language and other forms of communication to coordinate activities with others.

Collaboration: In the animal kingdom, cooperation and collaboration are critical for survival. Whether it's hunting in packs, raising offspring, or defending territory, animals often work together towards common goals. The elephant and his/her herd worked together to defend the waterbuck. Leaders can learn the importance of fostering collaboration among team members, leveraging diverse skills

and strengths to achieve collective success.

Resilience: Wild animals face numerous challenges, including predation, competition for resources and environmental changes. Despite these obstacles, many species exhibit remarkable resilience, bouncing back from setbacks and persevering in the face of adversity. For example, the waterbuck, Africa's majestic antelope known for their adaptability and resilience, has evolved to thrive in damp surroundings due to their waterproof coats and specialized glands that emit an oily substance (African Wildlife Detective, 2023). There have been instances where resilient waterbucks have managed to escape crocodiles in South Africa. Leaders can draw inspiration from the resilience of wild animals, learning to maintain optimism, adaptability and perseverance in the face of challenges.

Instinct and intuition: Wild animals rely on their instincts and intuition to navigate their environments, make decisions and respond to threats. Traditionally, lions have been crowned King of the Jungle as they are "ambush predators" that wait in spots where prey are most likely to pass. Lions are inherently more patient than other species. While lions are fearsome, carnivorous predators, elephants are family orientated herbivores and are known to be gentle giants despite their enormous size and sharp tusks. Although a solo lion will usually avoid an adult elephant, and attack younger elephants only if they have become separated from the herd, groups of lions will hunt elephants (BBC, 2009). Some prides of lions have learned how to hunt full-grown adults under dire circumstances when other food sources are scarce. While leaders must rely on data and analysis, in some instances instinct and intuition



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An Elephant's Act of Compassion

play a crucial role in decision-making (Allais, 2023). Leaders can learn to trust their instincts while also balancing them with rational analysis and evidence-based decision-making. According to an article published in the Harvard Business Review, trusting your gut can be useful, especially in highly uncertain circumstances where further data gathering and analysis won't sway you one way or another (Huang, 2019).

Studying wild animals can offer valuable lessons in leadership. Erna Walraven (2019), a zoologist, argues that leadership and followership are ancient features in human and many other mammalian societies. That is, leaders and followers occur in nearly all social mammal species, indicating that this feature likely originated in an ancient mammalian ancestor. In her article, Walraven explains that our evolutionary heritage and genetic relationships with chimps provide an interesting context from which to explore the leadership qualities of our wilder relatives. Given the chimpanzee and bonobo are humans' closest living relatives (American Museum of Natural History, 2024), she outlines that we can especially learn about power, politics and conflict resolution from the chimpanzees, possibly the most politically aware species on the planet after humans.

The idea of learning from animals is not new. For centuries, children and adults have cherished the stories about the brief adventures of animals and beasts passed down by Aesop, a slave who lived in ancient Greece in approximately the sixth century B.C. Aesop's fables, including "The Mouse and the Lion" and "The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," are known for their simplicity and provide insight into human behavior and how to lead a

good and prosperous life. Some have even argued that business leaders can learn some leadership lessons from Aesop's fables.

On that late rainy and cloudy afternoon in the wild, I saw the elephant behave compassionately and bravely toward the lioness to save the waterbuck. Was this behavior a random act of kindness motivated by altruism or driven by instinct? While I don't have the answer to the question, it became clear to me that wild animals can provide us with valuable insights into various aspects of leadership, including adaptability, communication, collaboration, resilience, and instinct and intuition. Most importantly, I was reminded that leaders need to show compassion and kindness. Why not act as the elephant?

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This article is dedicated to our guide, "King David," who sadly passed away on March 10, 2024.

TAMPA BAY LEADERSHIP REVIEW

A PUBLICATION OF THE TECO ENERGY CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP

SAVE THE DATE

TECO ENERGY CENTER FOR LEADERSHIP
UPCOMING EVENTS



Fall Leadership Speaker Series

Wednesday, Oct. 3, 2024

Plant Hall, Fletcher Lounge

4:30-5:30 p.m.

2025 Leadership Summit

Wednesday, Feb. 12, 2025

Vaughn Center, 9th Floor, Crescent Club

7:30 a.m.-1 p.m.

Spring Leadership Speaker Series

Monday, March 24, 2025

Vaughn Center, Crescent Club, 9th Floor

4:30-5:30 p.m.

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For program details, contact the TECO Energy Center for Leadership:

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