

Kezar, A. J., Carducci, R., & Contreras-McGavin, M. (2006). Rethinking the “L” word in higher education: The revolution of research on leadership. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 31(6). New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by Rachel Drennen

Introduction

When Kezar, Carducci, and Contreras-McGavin (2006) undertook the challenge of updating the ASHE Higher Education Report, *Making Sense of Administrative Leadership: The “L” Word in Higher Education* (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989), the purpose was to recognize that leadership in higher education has changed. Their monograph, *Rethinking the “L” Word in Higher Education* (Kezar et al., 2006), did not discount the leadership models presented by Bensimon et al. (1989), but it reflected the evolution of leadership and higher education in a globalized, more process-oriented society. By placing leadership in postmodern, social constructivist, and critical theory lenses, Kezar et al. (2006) explored new ideas and theories about the origin of leadership in higher education, who can participate in leadership in a higher education setting, and how leadership changes in various contexts.

Bensimon et al. (1989) framed their seminal work around six existing leadership models—trait theory, behavioral theory, power and influence theory, contingency theory, cognitive theory, and cultural/symbolic theory. Their text, one of the most cited references pertaining to leadership in higher education, captures the hierarchical, highly-structured leadership environments present in higher education in 1989. Models were based around a “heroic” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 2) leader who performed in a stratified leadership system. Leaders were more task-oriented than relationship focused, and there was little emphasis on team leadership. Kezar et al. (2006) modernized the work of Bensimon et al. (1989) to expand beyond best practices of college presidents and administrations to include a greater understanding of leadership in a variety of contexts within higher education.

Further analysis of each section of the monograph will highlight the shift toward context-based leadership and its role in the development of new leadership paradigms in higher education. The first section of the monograph provided greater analysis of the reason for the evolution of leadership in higher education. The second section of the monograph introduced a number of theoretical lenses important to understanding the applications of context-based leadership. Various concepts of leadership that are critical to producing global leaders were analyzed in the third section of the monograph. Specific leadership theories developed from 1989 to 1996 are discussed in the fifth section. Finally, the various concepts important to global leadership are applied and tailored to higher education in the sixth section.

Kezar et al. (2006) presented a well-framed argument that the understanding of leadership as strictly functional and stratified is no longer applicable to modern leadership practices in higher education. Kezar et al. (2006) effectively met their purpose of explicitly tying contemporary leadership theory to practice in higher education.

Theoretical Frame

Rethinking the “L” Word in Higher Education (Kezar et al., 2006) is unique in that it directly addressed the shift in world views, or paradigms, that have changed leadership since 1989. The authors specifically address three paradigms, social constructivism, postmodernism, and critical theory. These three lenses govern the function and form of the document. The resulting chapters concerning important topical areas in leadership and various leadership theories are based contextually in the three paradigms identified by Kezar et al. (2006).

Social constructivism assumes that leadership is socially constructed, impacted by culture and context, continuously evolving, and that it takes its shape from the subjective experience of the individual. The purpose for studying social constructivism and leadership, according to Kezar et al. (2006), is to understand what people identify as leadership, to help leaders see their own perspectives in context, and to foster the understanding that leaders’ perspectives impact the leadership process. In its most elemental form, social constructivism posits that one’s perception is one’s reality. Kezar et al. (2006) acknowledged that the dominant individuals in a group may define a leadership reality for the whole group and that normative beliefs impact every perception.

Critical theory is comprised of a number of smaller critical theories, but all of them focus specifically on examining power dynamics, particularly oppression or abuses of power. Critical theory also acknowledges that research is not neutral, that there is a need to develop new constructs of leadership, and that research is a form of activism. This paradigm is critical to an understanding of contemporary leadership because it accounts for social identity as a component of the leadership process. Critical theory also acknowledges that higher education is hierarchical and occasionally oppressive to certain leadership identities because of higher education’s history and traditions.

Postmodernism is the final paradigm highlighted by Kezar et al. (2006). They claim, “postmodernism emphasizes subjective and local experiences, history and context, fluidity and change” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 23). Postmodernism, like social constructivism, considers reality to be subjective, and, therefore, the emphasis in postmodernism is understanding the cultural norms that shape leaders’ perspectives. Postmodernism is primarily about the agency of the individual in the leadership process, and the question becomes: what agency does the individual have to shape his or her own existence.

Kezar et al. (2006) argued that not only are these paradigms useful for framing understanding of postindustrial leadership from the period of 1989 until now, but they can also provide practical frameworks for the “processes and practices” (p. 27) of campus leadership. All three of the paradigms that define the study of leadership in this monograph emphasize a return to ethical, moral, and values-based leadership. The leadership of the today and tomorrow shies away from considering the isolationist point of view that leadership is a character trait but instead posits that a values-based, global perspective is necessary for effective leadership in our society. This theoretical framework stages the rest of the document so that a discussion of contemporary topics in leadership and updated leadership theories derive from the global, values-based assumptions of the three paradigms.

Elements of the Book

As stated in the Introduction section of this review, the text began with an overview of why and how leadership has evolved from 1989 until the book was published in 2006. The authors, Kezar et al. (2006), were identified and some context was provided regarding the publication, *Making Sense of Administrative Leadership: The “L” Word in Higher Education* (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989), which was updated by *Rethinking the “L” Word in Higher Education* (Kezar et al., 2006).

The revolution in leadership.

The first chapter highlighted the importance of strong administrative leadership in higher education but challenged the notion of the singular leader as the most effective form of leadership. The purpose of the first chapter was to orient the reader and identify that “the context of leadership has changed and that new perspectives and ideas about leadership have been introduced from scholars and practitioners” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 3).

A world apart: New paradigms of leadership.

The second chapter, “A World Apart: New Paradigms of Leadership” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 15), introduced the three paradigms of leadership reviewed in the theoretical framework section of this analysis—social constructivism, critical theory, and postmodernism. All three paradigms focus on the importance of ethics and values in leadership, the subjective—and not universal—nature of leadership, and the need to recognize the power dynamics surrounding leadership. The paradigms opened the door for analysis of all instances of leadership in higher education, instead of a focus on the hierarchically most prominent leadership positions at a given institution. Kezar et al. (2006) discussed the practical implications of these world views on higher education. They claimed the paradigms can be employed for practical use, just as the tenets of such theories like trait theory were used by campus administrators to build their own strengths.

A world anew: The latest theories of leadership.

The third chapter, “A World Anew: The Latest Theories of Leadership” (Kezar et al., 2006), identified and reviewed the major theories of leadership developed from 1989 to 2006. The theories build upon the framework provided by the paradigms and complement the assumptions and research purposes of social constructivism, critical theory, and postmodernism. The theories included in the text are as follows: transformational leadership; complexity and chaos theory; mental models and organizational learning as an expansion on cognitive theory; social and cultural theories of leadership; processual leadership; and team or relational leadership. The discussion of each theory is delivered in several sections. Kezar et al. (2006) identify “(1) the definition of the theory, its emergence, and key scholars; (2) the theory’s major assumptions, contributions, and advantages; (3) key findings and insights from studies, if available; and (4) criticisms, problems, and issues that have emerged with the theory” (p. 32).

This condensed summary of each theory is indicative of the paradigms from which each theory springs. Transformational leadership was described as a process between leaders and followers where ethical and moral practices of leadership are highly valued; leadership for the purpose of empowerment or social change was emphasized. Complexity and chaos theories challenge traditional notions of hierarchical leadership, emphasize the effectiveness of innovation and collaboration, and foster interdependent relationships within organizations. Cognitive theories of leadership focus on the individual lenses through which leaders see that provide context for their leadership behaviors. Social and cultural theories place great importance on values, meanings, tradition, and other forms of cultural context that impact

leadership. Processual leadership is, as may be evident, process focused and is specifically concentrated on the impact of “macrocontextual conditions” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 62), like society and global economy, on leadership. Finally, relational or team leadership was described as a collective process in which teams are viewed as having culture and context, and relationships are emphasized. Each theory referenced in the text moves away from leadership as an independent process and emphasizes collaboration and context in leadership.

Revolutionary concepts of leadership.

The fourth chapter, “Revolutionary Concepts of Leadership” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 71), identified a number of leadership concepts that emerged in the context of the shifting paradigms and leadership theories. The concepts mentioned in the text are as follows: ethics and spirituality, collaboration and partnering, empowerment, social change, emotions, globalization, entrepreneurialism, and accountability. These concepts are crucial to any understanding of the macro-level study of leadership in a global, collaborative society. This chapter emphasizes the importance of self-reflection on one’s own values and ethics in order to lead in a changing society. Kezar et al. (2006) also suggested that leadership should align with social movement, and awareness about others’ identities is an important piece to that alignment.

Higher education leadership in the new world.

Chapter five transitions the text’s contents from general understandings of leadership toward leadership in higher education. The chapter, entitled, “Higher Education Leadership in the New World” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 101), emphasized that the college president is no longer the singular leader on any college campus. Leadership on college campuses must be found from a collective group of change agents including campus administration, students, staff, and faculty. Task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership are both crucial to the success of a leader in higher education. He or she must be able to set goals, form connections, build cognitive complexity, perform politically, and align his or her leadership practices with values. Leadership in higher education must be about learning.

Revolutionary leadership concepts in higher education.

Chapter six, “Revolutionary Leadership Concepts in Higher Education” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 137), employs the leadership concepts identified in the fourth chapter in a higher education context. Collaboration and empowerment were quickly embraced on college campuses because of the team nature of institutions of higher education, but social change as a concept struggles against the firmly rooted traditions on campuses. Entrepreneurialism, globalization, and accountability were also identified by Kezar et al. (2006) as concepts that have not been as easily adopted in higher education.

Practical implications for the leadership revolution.

Chapter seven, “Practical Implications for the Leadership Revolution,” suggested that concepts like collaborative leadership, inspiring a shared vision, grounding one’s leadership in ethical principles, and the development of relationships are all practices on which leaders in higher education must focus their time in developing in themselves and their students. The emphasis on hierarchy is passé and a relational, authentic leader is more influential in higher education.

Framing leadership research in a new era.

Finally, chapter eight, “Framing Leadership Research in a New Era” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 169), outlines an ambitious leadership agenda to further our understanding of leadership in higher education. The authors call for the development of studies of leadership based around the paradigms; closer scrutiny of power dynamics; understanding failed examples of leadership;

research in leadership pertaining to globalization, entrepreneurialism, and accountability; studies on cross-cultural leadership; and more empirical data about leadership as a social movement.

Best Target Audience

This book is specifically geared toward professionals in higher education, be those individuals faculty, staff, or administration. The authors provide appropriate examples of leadership studies conducted, and nicely summarize an enormous breadth of major leadership concepts in a concise format. The content is not as accessible for students, particularly given that all examples of practice applied to professionals. A concern about this focus is that, while hierarchy within education was touted as no longer a successful leadership model, focusing on administrators, faculty, and staff creates a hierarchy that places students beneath that group of individuals.

Critique

Kezar et al. (2006) are to be commended for their work with *Rethinking the "L" Word in Higher Education*. The depth of their assessment of previous models of leadership in higher education and their expansion on the concepts provided in the 1989 text were clear, concise, and easily applicable to professionals who work to develop their own leadership and the leadership of their students in a global society. Their summaries of key elements of the changing leadership landscape of college campuses put words to a movement that is visible everywhere but is often not discussed in classrooms or trustee meetings. They succeeded in providing context for practitioners in higher education to improve their leadership skills.

The primary function of the text was to explain the shift in leadership to administrators in higher education. As a result, the explicit application of themes like relationship building and global leadership to student development was missing. Kezar et al. (2006) discussed ways in which student affairs practitioners could improve their own practices in order to meet the educational needs of students, but the authors did not expand upon best strategies for utilizing these theories with students.

The text has a number of uses for student affairs practitioners. The text stressed the importance of understanding the intersection of identity with leadership; this concept is particularly applicable to student leadership development. Armed with the knowledge of identity's importance, practitioners could foster authentic leadership development in students by encouraging students to define their own leadership style. Furthermore, the text could enable practitioners to encourage students to subvert the leadership norms in society. Practitioners could also use the information provided in the text about the future of leadership in teams to create opportunities for students to work in concert with other students to achieve goals. By placing this emphasis on collaborative leadership, the student affairs practitioner is setting a positive example for students developing their leadership. Finally, the student affairs practitioner must address the leadership climate on his or her own campus to deduce the presence of collaboration of social change; if those key concepts are not a focus, it is the responsibility of the student affairs practitioner to model these best practices of leadership for students.

Overall, the text was very comprehensive and will likely become a seminal leadership text in its own right, independent of the 1989 version.

Reviewer

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