**Building Academic Leadership Capacity: A Guide to Best Practices**  
Walter H. Gmelch & Jeffrey L. Buller  
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**Rating: Three Stars**

I have been a member of the Chair Academy since 2007 and now serve as a facilitator working in the area of leadership training and development. Additionally, I work with universities supporting their leadership development programs. While every institution is different, one thing is clear to me: there is both a need and a hunger for leadership training and development across the academy. Gmelch and Buller’s (2015) work, *Building Academic Leadership Capacity: A Guide to Best Practices* is an outstanding resource because it provides a detailed but malleable framework that academic institutions can use as they seek to build a strategy for identifying and cultivating leadership competency and, as the title describes, building leadership capacity.

This work is based on the authors’ research around leadership development best practices. Thus, the book is built upon what institutions are doing successfully to develop leaders and how this aggregated information can be used to help other institutions develop their own programs. The authors have done an outstanding job in providing a tool that has been a long time in coming. Based on what I have seen in my own work, this is the type of resource that will help those responsible for designing leadership development programs think strategically and tactically about what a comprehensive and value-added program would look like.

The book is divided into nine chapters that when taken together provide a clear roadmap to the reader regarding the process for building a leadership development program that actually improves the short-term and long-term performance as well as advance the career aspirations of administrators. Chapter 1 is the authors’ rationale for why developing leadership is critical and vital. Leadership development is in “severe trouble indeed” (p. 1) when it comes to the intentional and strategic work that is not taking place in higher education. Leadership, due to the lack of formal and structured training, must be learned in an ad hoc fashion…on the job and in the trenches. What results from this poor administrative preparation is that
programs suffer, institutions suffer, and individuals suffer. While the authors argue there are plenty of resources and independent programs designed to resource and support administrative leadership development, when it comes to structured, consistent, and ongoing leadership development within the institution, there is a poverty of activity.

The authors argue that what is needed (and what is currently missing) when it comes to academic administrative leadership development “is not a program that lasts for a day, a week, or even a month but a career-long development program that meets where they are and carries them where they need to go” (p. 6). It is here that the authors introduce their paradigm for developing academic leaders. The paradigm is based on their case study called The Academic Leadership Forum (ALF) which was implemented at Iowa State University from 2000 to 2004. The discoveries made over this four-year span during the ALF become the basis for the structure and content of the book.

The ALF provided administrators training in the 7-S model, which is a corporate training model, used to support leadership development in three hard-skills areas (strategy, structure, and systems) and four soft-skills areas (staff, skills, style, and shared values). The authors go into substantial detail in explaining the content used in each of the seven areas of the training and the result of that training. As noted earlier, the balance of the book discusses each area of the 7-S model and, in particular, focuses on how what was discovered can be parlayed by any institution that is seeking to build a leadership development program for administrators and, by extension, faculty leaders who are seeking to move into higher education administration.

Chapters two, three, and four explain the hard skills training the participants received during the ALF process. Chapter two addresses the first component of the 7-S model: strategy. Three areas of this chapter are significant for the reader. First, the authors provide a definition of leadership that focuses on leadership as process, leadership as influence, and leadership that is focused on groups and which involves shared direction, established and shared goals (pp. 35-39). Second, the authors discuss academic leadership as the work of building a community of scholars, providing direction for the institution or part of the institution, and the process of empowering others to act (pp. 40-44). Third, the authors discuss what they call “The Three Habits” leaders must cultivate: the habits of mind, the habits of practice, and habits of the
heart (pp. 45-50). I find it encouraging that this three-part definition of the ALF’s approach to leadership springs from the work of Peter Northouse (2016) in his excellent book, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*.

Chapter three looks into the area of how leaders provide structure in the development of a leadership training program. This is critical to administrators because, if not executed well, it can easily undermine the credibility of the sponsor and undermine the legitimacy of a potential program. Training in and around structure includes a leader who works to advance and champion a structured and sustainable leadership development initiative. Next, a thorough and detailed plan must be developed regarding where the leadership program will be based, how it will operate, who will support it, and what person or group will oversee it. Staffing the leadership program adequately must also be a concern. This includes supporting the scheduling, logistics, preparation, and support before, during, and after the training. Allocating sufficient resources is also necessary. Any leadership program must have the resources required to deliver an outstanding training process. The authors provide an exemplary checklist of the resources required to ensure a strong foundation (pp. 65-67). Chapter three comes to an end with an emphasis on sustaining the leadership training initiative both practically and politically.

Chapter four concludes the hard skills emphasis of developing a leadership training strategy by addressing what the authors call “systems.” This critical area is about making decisions about the types of leadership approaches, philosophies, and models (systems) that will buttress and support the program. This decision about a leadership program’s “core” is vital to how the larger organizational system will be impacted as those who are trained influence their own systems in the institution. This macro consideration is of tremendous import. It would be rather easy, if not dangerous, for any leadership development program for administrators to address leadership competencies and capacity without thinking about how the larger institutional system will be impacted. One can also reverse the causal cycle in answering this question. Beginning with what we want the institution to look like will inform the type of leaders who can create this type of institution and thus inform the type of content that can shape the type of leaders who can then shape and create that type of institution.

Chapters five, six, seven, and eight direct the reader’s attention to the soft skills areas to be addressed in the training. Chapter five details staffing models for the leadership program. The staff as
support group option allows those who are involved to teach one another out of their expertise. In this format, the participants are also the presenters. Another option is where staff serve as expert consultants to program participants. There is a distinct line drawn between those who do the training and those who receive the training. Program content is scaffolded to allow for sequential areas of focus that build on one another. A third option for staffing is what the authors call a blended approach (or what I would call a “just-in-time” model of delivering leadership training). Here, there is administrative support for the training and content delivery is a combination of in-house experts and those who are brought in from the outside.

Chapter six speaks to the skills needed to be a successful academic leader. The skills identified then become linked to the content of the leadership training itself. The authors advocate for a tripartite (or three-level approach) of addressing skills. These include personal skills, institutional skills, and professional skills. A helpful breakdown of which skills are required in each of the three areas is provided in the chapter (p. 119). The leadership skills addressed, as the authors note, should be broad-based rather than narrow. Administrators need to have a wide range of skills that allow them to operate in a number of different environments, with different types of people, who are addressing different priorities. This broad-based skill set can be divided into three questions: what is it that administrators do, what skills are most important for their success, and in what areas do administrators most need training (p. 122). The work of administrators should be addressed but also the work of department chairs, deans, and other academic leaders as well.

Chapter seven hones in on the topic of leadership program style. I define this as the way the leadership program supports the mission and vision of the institution and its overall support and advancement of the institutional culture. This chapter includes a number of cultural factors that are involved in a leadership training program such as program outcomes, program activities, cultural considerations, and values frameworks. This chapter invites the reader to consider how a leadership development program considers institutional and contextual themes that can be identified and strengthened by a leadership development program.

Chapter eight brings the reader to the conclusion of the section addressing the soft skills of a leadership program. The content in this chapter speaks to the importance of shared values as a key
component of leadership development. The authors describe three levels of shared values. The first are shared values on a personal level. This would include intentional reflection on one’s thinking, behaving, and performance about oneself and one’s leadership impact and effectiveness within the organization. The second are shared values on an institutional level. This would involve exploring one’s leadership effectiveness and impact within the institution as viewed by trusted colleagues or confidants who can listen, support, and provide valuable and objective feedback. The third are shared values on a professional level. This would include such areas as professional networks, associations, or conferences…any place where the leader can find both camaraderie and resourcing. The chapter concludes with a marvelous section on what it means to bring personal values into the work of leadership (pp. 179-181).

The final chapter in the book talks about the process for bringing everything together in an approach the authors call comprehensive academic leadership (CAL). There are three essential aspects to CAL. The first is ensuring that all the components needed to build a strongly integrated leadership development program are available. The second is identifying how these components connect and build coherence. The third is ensuring the program has a distinct and clear identity. The authors provide some valuable checklists for each of the three areas.

In summary, *Building Academic Leadership Capacity* is an outstanding “how to” guide for institutions who are no longer satisfied with a piecemeal and truncated approach to leadership development (if they have a leadership development program at all) but rather who are prepared to build an integrated and sustainable approach to leadership development for key institutional leaders. Because of my own experience working with academic institutions in leadership, the work of Gmelch and Buller will play a vital role in the process of developing those men and women who lead and influence our academic institutions.