WELD Leadership Book Review

Title: Academic Leadership: A Practical Guide to Chairing the Department
Author: Deryl R. Leaming
Year Published: 1998
Reviewer: Sonja Koukel, University of Alaska Fairbanks
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Academic Leadership: A Practical Guide to Chairing the Department was discovered among the resources of a previous faculty member who had served Alaska Cooperative Extension in the Juneau District. Accompanying the book was a handwritten note from a 2001 University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) administrator. It appears that copies of the book were sent to all UAF Department Chairs and Division Heads as, “Part of our continuing efforts to provide training and support for you, the leaders of our academic programs.” Through this simple gesture, the UAF administrator demonstrated one of the many good leadership traits described in Leaming’s book: encouraging the development of others.

Studies have shown that successful leadership is “a concept difficult to articulate and understand.” Typically, in university settings leadership training can be characterized as casual to non-existent, oriented only toward understanding administrative procedures. Leaming recognized that what makes the role of chair challenging is that as faculty, one is rarely prepared for the responsibilities that come with the title. Academic Leadership was written in an attempt to address that situation.

In a brief overview, the author considers the more general theories of leadership that tend to emphasize the behavior traits of leaders: vigor, decisiveness, and a willingness to take action. Particularly noted is one theory of natural leaders that supports the idea that leaders possess certain common qualities. However, Leaming points out that while the existence of certain traits is likely to increase a leader’s effectiveness, by no means do these traits ensure strong leadership.

This book is a good guide for new chairpersons as they deal with academic and departmental responsibilities, such as budgets, fundraising, promotion and tenure issues, recruiting students, and dealing with curriculum matters. Yet, what is found within the pages of this book ventures beyond how to be an effective leader. The underlying message and recurring theme that predominates throughout Leaming’s writing is the emphasis on character development: treating others ethically, building and maintaining morale in the workplace, communicating effectively, and managing change.

Leaming’s message can be applicable to any individual, in any workplace situation. For instance, in Chapter 2, “Seven Habits of Successful Chairpersons,” the author outlines common characteristics of successful chairpersons. 1) they have goals; 2) they are interested in the people with whom they work; 3) they are agents of change; 4) they understand and appreciate teaching, research, and public service; 5) they are honest, forthright, decent people; 6) they are fair and evenhanded; and 7) they are consensus builders and good communicators. This reviewer considers these seven habits as traits not only of successful chairpersons, but successful people in general.

Although the target audience for this writing is academic department or program chairs, all faculty members at the local, district, and state levels would find worthwhile value in the information provided. Leaming’s book is an excellent read and a worthy addition to career and professional development resources.