

ACADEMIC Leader



Leading by Your Values

Rebecca Pope-Ruark • September 6, 2022

As I write this in early August, I am wrapping up planning for my faculty development office's annual kickoff for the New Faculty Leaders Academy, a yearlong series of workshops and conversations on topics new chairs and assistant deans will find important to their jobs. Practical topics like budgeting, negotiating difficult conversations, and writing faculty assessments will be covered in a just-in-time fashion throughout the year. For the kickoff, the new leaders will meet with the leadership in the Office of the Vice Provost of Faculty for breakfast, introductions, and most importantly, time to define their leadership values and philosophy.

It might seem soft to start with defining values and a philosophy when a chair has so many urgent responsibilities; it's definitely what some might call touchy-feely. Our values, for example, are deeply personal, but not something we often spend any length of time pondering, questioning, or articulating. The culture of higher education is one of entrenched values, including pursuing knowledge, preparing future citizens and professionals, and achieving ever-greater levels of excellence. Higher ed has other values—shadow values—as well: competition, free labor, hope labor, and toxic productivity.

As a tenured faculty member pre-burnout, I bought into all these values, the good and not so good. Hoping to take on leadership roles, I was confident I was qualified to be in charge of something because that was the next thing to do on the ladder to full professor. My own values at that time were achievement, success, productivity, respect, and recognition. But both mindfully and mindlessly letting these values guide me, I ran myself into a state that damaged my mental and physical health. Burnout was a wake-up call to reassess my life, define my own values, and align those with the work I wanted to do.

This experience, as well as my training as a coach in higher education, are some of the reasons why I believe paying attention to values and philosophy—another word that can seem touchy-feely—is especially important for new faculty leaders during what one article calls the Great Faculty Disengagement. In [that piece](#), Kevin R. McClure and Alisa Hicklin Fryar argue that, after the Great Resignation, faculty who stayed aren't making big moves but are instead quietly withdrawing, checking out in disillusionment after the dust settles from pandemic responses and more than two years of feeling undervalued, overworked, and even betrayed by the ways institutions have handled the pandemic. In his article "[The Big Quit](#)," Joshua Doležal posits that "Covid-19 did not transform faculty attitudes toward higher education as much as it deepened longstanding concerns about disrespect, inadequate compensation, and unsustainable work/life balance."

New faculty leaders are walking into a landscape quite different from the one their predecessors knew. Certainly the work of a chair has a short on-ramp, immediately throwing new chairs into hiring and managing faculty, dealing with administration and student needs, and organizing schedules and funds. But now? It's even more complicated, with burned-out students, colleagues who are potentially planning to leave or "[quietly quitting](#)," and senior leadership and boards determined to return to "normal" as soon as possible.

Now more than ever, our leaders need to understand their values and lead with an eye toward principles that guide their work in the complex environment they find themselves in. A search for "leadership values" in the *Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Ed* returned [one article](#); it mentions values in connection with reflective exercises at a chair training program. Good leadership comes from knowing your values, working with those values in mind, and demonstrating those to those you lead. This can be especially difficult for new faculty leaders who may be seen as "turning to the dark side" (i.e., administration) instead of as a colleague stepping up into a leadership role in the department or college.

So what could professional development for new faculty leaders look like in this Great Disengagement? When do new leaders have time to think about leadership values and philosophy? What questions might new leaders be asking themselves and their faculty as the fall semester gets underway?

Consider dedicating one meeting early in the academic year and one at the end to articulating values and leadership philosophy.

Values activities are easy to find online. I use [Brené Brown's values list](#) from her *Dare to Lead* resources because it's a good one-page place to start. A quick internet search will deliver thousands of words and

worksheets to consider, but this worksheet lists more than 100 values words to choose from and includes space to add additional words, making it more manageable than others.

When I do the exercise with faculty and coaching clients, I ask them to take several passes through the word list:

1. Circle the words that resonate with you broadly.
2. Underline the words that you think are the values higher ed wants you to have.
3. Star the values that you think are most important for someone in a leadership role like yours.
4. Look at your lists, and come up with four to five overarching categories for the values you want to commit to during your time as a faculty leader.

Once new leaders have chosen their values, have a conversation about what they learned about themselves and their nascent leadership philosophy through the activity.

The next step is to use those values to articulate that leadership philosophy, the guiding principles behind how a leader will act ethically, fairly, and responsibly. I'm a big fan of fill-in-the-blank statements for work like this. They offer structure that allows the writer to focus on content rather than phrasing. I've adapted [this one](#) with my chairs in mind:

To me, leadership as a chair/assistant dean means _____, _____, and _____.
As a faculty leader, I should _____, _____, and _____ to be effective. I will inspire members of my school/department to _____, _____, and _____. In myself and my faculty, I value _____, _____, and _____. I will not tolerate _____ from myself or my faculty. My ultimate goal as chair/assistant dean is to _____.

When they have filled out the framework statements, invite a discussion on what they learned about themselves and ways they can act on their philosophy in different situations during the year to come.

If you are meeting with new faculty leaders throughout the year, revisit the values and philosophy occasionally, especially during stressful times on the calendar. Check in to see how they are doing leading with their values, and hold a gathering at the end of the academic year to all for reflection, revision, and updating of their leadership philosophy now that they have a full year under their belts.

Taking time to focus on values and philosophy for leadership gives new chairs and assistant deans an opportunity to ground themselves in a vision as they dive into what can be overwhelming but rewarding work. It's time well spent.

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