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Julia Hovanec
hovanec@kutztown.edu

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The Department Chair and Creative Leadership

Julia L. Hovanec, PhD.

Leading a department in the everchanging and, at times, tumultuous landscape of higher education calls for creative problem-solving and divergent thinking. Creative Leadership (CL) answers that call. The goal is to spur change while cultivating an inclusive department. Before defining CL as a whole, a good idea is to consider the two terms separately.

Sir Ken Robinson says creativity is "a process of having original ideas that have value (Robinson, 2015)." He also considers imagination as the source of creativity. Creative individuals can apply their imagination in various scenarios, situations, places, and spaces. When describing creativity, the word; innovation is also vital. An innovative department chairperson can set novel notions in motion.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that all humans have creative capacities; creativity can be nurtured, cultivated, and refined. Creativity is possible in all areas of human life, not just in the arts. The word creative often refers to original outcomes of significance (courses offered, programs of study, recruitment initiatives, and more) as well as the individuals (the department) who collaboratively creates the work (Weisberg, 1993). In addition, creativity is hard work and bolsters resiliency (Mentz & Morrell, 2008).

Leadership has had many different definitions over the years. In a recent article, Kevin Kruse cites various definitions of leadership that he feels are incomplete before arriving at this definition. Leadership is a process of social influence that maximizes the efforts of others toward the achievement of a goal (Kruse, 2022). This comprehensive definition makes sense, especially when considering academic department chairpersons and higher education. Their leadership is

unique in that they lead under the broader umbrella of the culture and politics of the academic institution (Anthony & Antony, 2017). Leadership comes from social influence; it includes others with no specific attributes or personality traits and mentions a goal that maximizes the efforts of others.

A department chairperson must be able to lead diverse personalities and capitalize on their strengths while at the same time fostering areas of further growth and development. This practice will boost the group's efforts to reach department goals.

Putting the two terms together yields a unique leadership style for department chairs; creative leadership. CL is centered on the idea of the department members reflectively working together to develop new ideas and solve problems and issues around enrollment, retention, equity, diversity, inclusion, culturally relevant and sustaining teaching, assessment, and others creatively. Rama Gheerawo, Director of the Helen Centre for Design at London's Royal College of Art, has developed CL into a multilateral leadership model. Gheerawo (2022) says that creative leadership is about activating and bringing one's head, heart, and hands into dynamic and powerful balance. Acting, thinking, and creative problem-solving amplify an academic chairperson's efficacy. More often than not, leaders who can think outside the proverbial box see results and simultaneously nurture personal and professional growth and development for colleagues and themselves. It is important to note that a department chair, and everyone, can tap into their creativity, and everybody has the potential to be a leader.

CL is about redesigning and changing thinking about leadership (Gheerawo, 2022). Due to the apparent limitations of top-down models, CL has advanced considerably over the last ten years, especially within the past two years, in response to the pandemic. Generally, how people lead in higher education has transformed since 2020 (Gigliotti, 2021), mainly because priorities

have changed significantly for department chairpersons. As stated earlier, this variation calls for creativity and, some might say, a reinvention to redefine the role of the academic chairperson. Intuition assists academic chairpersons in being creatively proactive, and when issues are anticipated in advance, it pays off in dividends. When provided with the proper tools, department members can be more intuitive since creatively reacting to the many issues faced in higher education is fine, but being creatively proactive is even better. Adding intuition to creative leadership, empathy, clarity, and creativity make the perfect team and aids in the department's ability to envision possibilities for the future. New outcomes can be inferred and established with the assistance of intuition (Müller, 2021).

An effective creative leader works diligently and intuitively to design an environment that builds creative capacities for all department members and provides the necessary organization, activities, and space to sustain divergent thinking and creative problem-solving. It is about activating inner creativity and the potential to lead based on empathy, creativity, and clarity (Gheerawo, 2022).

The four creative, reflective activities shared in this article inspired by Pat Mora (2010), Tom & David Kelley (2013), Gheerawo (2022), and Wheeler et al. (2008), as well as Crayola Creativity Ambassador workshops (2022), are outlined below.

1. Creative Leader: A Creative & Reflective Visual Self Leadership Assessment (adapted from Crayola Creativity Ambassador Workshop, 2022) - This exercise is perfect for the chair to complete independently. If desired, they can share their results with the department and have them complete them during a retreat or to start a meeting. The principle that how individuals perceive themselves impacts how they lead their life serves as the basis for this tool. To begin this strategy, the person sketches their head, or they can color on top of a photocopy of their face.

Next, they divide their self-portrait in half with the intent of one half featuring their outer self or what others see and the other half visually illustrating their inner leadership qualities. The academic chairperson completes this creative encounter by considering their personal and professional identity, their strengths, what makes them unique, and how others have described them. Further, they think about adjectives describing their leadership style and adverbs that bring those attributes to life. Finally, chairpersons are asked to make their thinking visible by using colors, lines, and shapes to express what is on their minds. This activity proves to be a valuable, creative, and reflective self-assessment tool.

2. Time for Creative Quiet - Walking a circular path is a way to practice entering quiet (Mora, 2010). It promotes creative and critical thinking while at the same time offering solitude and refreshment. Labyrinths have long proved to be a way for people to reflect. People follow a single winding path from the outer edge into the center. They have the potential to quiet the mind while enhancing creativity. Today there are digital and finger labyrinths that are readily available. This exercise combines the ideas behind a labyrinth and brings quiet places and spaces to mind. Places or spaces the participant goes to withdraw, retreat and sit in stillness and, as Pat Mora (2010) says, "go into oneself for a bit and discover the silence to do inside work." The following questions help them get to this place in their mind. What place nurtures their solitude? Where do they do their best thinking? Finally, participants sketch those places and imagine themselves in them. Drawing from memory is fine; cutting out images from magazines and creating a collage will work, and using a postcard is another good idea. Added to the art is a finger labyrinth. They engage with their work and stay in those places for five or more minutes.

3. Creative Shield Team Building - This exercise, adapted from Wheeler et al., 2008, embraces the notion that creativity is a mindset for all. It is an empathetic, inclusive, and inspirational tool

best implemented at the beginning of a new school year. Before engaging the team in the collectively creative activity, chairpersons must make some choices and considerations. The following questions can help in the planning process. The department chairpersons should ask these questions of themselves. What knowledge, skills, and dispositions does the department need now? How can the department members' varying strengths, talents, and points of view contribute to the department's efficacy? How can feelings and history be valued while cultivating change and growth? Next, the chair sends an email to the group to find out their three top priorities for the new school year, whether they feel the time was spent on the right initiatives in previous years, what they felt was a highlight from the previous year, and a lowlight. The chair can also devise in this email what accomplishment from the year before had the most significance, if they felt like there were any mistakes or failures, if there are goals they feel made progress, and finally, what helped to make that progress. The department chair is now prepared to create an appropriate and differentiated team-building exercise that meets the department members where they are. This preliminary work eliminates surprises that might impede the activities' progress. As the department arrives, there is a large piece of paper in the center of the table cut into the shape of a shield divided into four sections. Section one outlines each member's knowledge, skills, and dispositions to the department, and section two details areas of further growth and development of each member. Section three asks what they feel is working well in the department, and section four is what the members feel is not working well or could be improved upon in the department. Of course, these quadrant labels can be changed depending on the department's particular needs. They are creating a department shield because shields contain unique designs and symbols representing a family. Team members work together to fill in the sections. They engage in dialog. All members can write, draw and add images to complete the

shield. Post-it notes are an excellent tool to use in the creation of this poster. When finished, all team members share what they took from the exercise and how they can use it to plan and envision the future intuitively.

4. Three-Act Play: Creatively and Intuitively Envisioning the Future - The premise of a growth mindset is the underpinning of this exercise. A growth mindset means people view themselves as everchanging and lifelong learners, and they know that mistakes are a big part of this growth. On the other hand, a fixed mindset means people view their abilities as innate; they are uncomfortable with mistakes. This activity also clarifies the department as they can take stock and look toward the future. The chairperson asks the department members to write the story of their time in the department in three acts like a play. The first act includes past goals achieved and other accomplishments of note, the second is the present situation, including the good and not-so-good parts, and the last act is their vision for the future of the department. Providing ample time for members to complete this task individually ahead of a scheduled meeting is a wise idea. At the meeting, all members share their play. Others can make a note of and discuss what the plays have in common and what is different. Finally, the department can collectively write the department's story in three acts. This exercise helps the department to creatively, empathetically, and collectively envision the future and gives all members a positive perspective and clarity about future achievements and possibilities.

CL can help overcome departmental challenges where members embrace change, work collaboratively, and creatively envision challenges as learning opportunities. No matter the challenges a department may face, CL can help conquer them as creative leaders foster a climate that promotes innovation, bringing their forward and big-picture thinking department into a more productive future.

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