

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Application of Leadership Challenge Principles to Strategic Enrollment Management: Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership

By Jerry Ross

There has never been a more important time for both enrollment management and campus leaders. Higher education is going through a period of great transition that will necessitate transformations in how we do our work. In the military, there is an acronym VUCA that stands for conditions that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Bennis and Nanus 1985). Enrollment management and higher education currently sit in this space.

Demographic challenges, increased competition, and many other issues have resulted in trying times for all campus leaders, but especially for those who hold leadership roles in enrollment management. While there are numerous leadership texts that can be helpful in navigating these challenges, two texts have been incredibly helpful in guiding me through two different senior enrollment officer roles as well as other leadership positions. In both of these senior enrollment officer roles, I helped lead organizations through immense transitions. None of us do it alone, though, and the

practices detailed below help us develop current and future leaders within our organizations. Over the years, I have frequently referred back to these two texts as well as used them in developing teams.

Leadership in Higher Education by Kouzes and Posner (2019) highlights five key practices of good leadership that can help university leaders at any level navigate these challenging times. These practices are not isolated activities but rather interrelated and interconnected. Effective leaders often engage in all five practices to inspire and guide their teams toward success. These practices are adaptable to various contexts, including higher education, and can help leaders achieve their goals and foster a positive organizational culture. This book is a companion work to the original *The Leadership Challenge* by the same authors. Although they are two separate works, the framework of the five practices is the same; the distinction between the two books is that the illustrative examples are higher education specific in one (Kouzes and Posner 2019).

Summary of the Five Practices

The five practices of exemplary leadership as outlined in both of these works are below. Although conceptually the same, there are references to specific practices from each book below. These practices serve as a foundation for effective leadership in various contexts, including higher education:

- **Model the Way:** Leaders who “model the way” are those who lead by example (Kouzes and Posner 2019). They set the standard for behavior and actions within the organization. Key aspects of this practice include:
 - *Clarifying Values:* Leaders identify and articulate their own personal values and principles and align them with the organization’s values. They demonstrate consistency between their words and actions.
 - *Setting the Example:* Leaders act in ways that are consistent with the values and principles they espouse. They serve as role models for others to follow.
- **Inspire a Shared Vision:** Effective leaders inspire and engage their teams by creating and communicating a compelling vision for the future (Kouzes and Posner 2019). This practice involves:
 - *Imagining the Future:* Leaders envision a clear and inspiring future that goes beyond the status quo. They generate enthusiasm and commitment among their team members.
 - *Enlisting Others:* Leaders involve others in shaping the vision and making it a shared aspiration. They encourage collaboration and input from team members.
- **Challenge the Process:** Leaders who “challenge the process” are open to innovation and are willing to challenge existing norms and practices (Kouzes and Posner 2023). Key components of this practice include:
 - *Searching for Opportunities:* Leaders actively seek out new opportunities and innovative ways of doing things. They encourage experimentation and creativity.

→ *Taking Risks:* Effective leaders are not afraid to take calculated risks. They recognize that some failures are a natural part of the learning process.

- **Enable Others to Act:** This practice emphasizes the importance of collaboration and empowering others within the organization (Kouzes and Posner 2023). It involves:

- *Fostering Collaboration:* Leaders build trust and create a collaborative environment where team members feel safe to express their ideas and opinions.
- *Strengthening Others:* Leaders provide support, resources, and opportunities for skill development to enable their team members to excel and contribute effectively.

- **Encourage the Heart:** Recognizing and celebrating accomplishments is vital for sustaining motivation and commitment (Kouzes and Posner 2019). Key elements of this practice include:

- *Recognizing Contributions:* Leaders acknowledge and appreciate the efforts and contributions of individuals and teams. They provide regular feedback and recognition.
- *Celebrating Wins:* Leaders celebrate both small and large victories to create a positive and enthusiastic atmosphere. Celebrations reinforce a sense of achievement and shared purpose.

Application of the Five Practices

Model the Way

As a leader in the enrollment management division, start by clarifying the core values that underpin your institution’s enrollment efforts and overall strategic enrollment efforts. Ensure that these values are not just words on paper but are actively integrated into your enrollment strategies. For instance, if your university values diversity and inclusivity, make it a central part of your enrollment messaging and practices. Lead by example, and demonstrate ethical behavior in all enrollment interactions. Emphasize honesty, transparency, and fairness when communicating with prospective

students and their families. Your consistent adherence to these values will set the tone for the entire division.

This can be something as simple as how you conduct your daily work and run meetings. In my current role, I have worked to provide more structure within the organization. By modeling this behavior, I have seen this trickle down throughout the organization. We are more organized and structured in both our day to day work as well as in our planning. At the same time, we do not sacrifice innovation (see below on Challenging the Process).

In both my current and previous roles, I have worked to model behavior beyond this as well. Leaders model the shared values for the organization and set the tone for how these values are carried out by every member of the organization. These values include, but are not limited to, how we treat people, our culture, and the expectations of meeting university goals related to enrollment.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Crafting a compelling enrollment vision is essential to rallying a team around a common purpose. Develop a vision that transcends mere enrollment numbers and instead focuses on building a diverse, engaged, and thriving student community. Paint a vivid picture of what success looks like and how it aligns with the university's mission and goals. To inspire your team, involve them in shaping this vision. Encourage them to share their insights and ideas on how to realize enrollment goals while staying true to the university's mission. A shared vision creates a sense of purpose and commitment among the enrollment team.

Getting buy in to a shared vision is incredibly important for any organization, but especially important for enrollment management divisions. Every single person within the organization has a role in that shared vision and has the potential to influence a student's decision-making. That vision must be future focused while maintaining your core values. It is important to make that vision a shared one by involving others in developing the vision as well as in executing the vision.

Oftentimes that vision is confused with goals. We may have a goal of growing enrollment, but that is not

necessarily the vision itself. An organization's goals are specific, measurable targets or objectives that the organization aims to achieve within a defined period. These goals are typically derived from the organization's overall vision and mission and serve as stepping stones toward realizing that vision.

On the other hand, an organization's vision is a broader, aspirational statement that describes what the organization ultimately hopes to accomplish or become in the future. It articulates the desired long-term outcome or impact the organization seeks to achieve and often serves as a guiding principle for decision-making and strategic planning. In essence, goals are the tangible milestones or targets that contribute to fulfilling the overarching vision of the organization.

Challenge the Process

Effective enrollment often requires innovative thinking and the willingness to challenge traditional methods. Encourage your team to explore new approaches to student enrollment. Challenge the status quo by leveraging technologies, data analytics, and creative marketing strategies to identify and reach potential students effectively. Emphasize the importance of ongoing evaluation and data analysis to assess the effectiveness of your enrollment strategies. Encourage your team to question assumptions and adapt to changing demographics and trends in higher education.

As much as any component within higher education, enrollment management is one that must constantly innovate and change. Our processes today may not be the processes that will make us successful in future admissions cycles. Providing space to innovate and enabling a culture of innovation are crucial to the long-term success of both enrollment management and higher education. Unfortunately, higher education has not historically been a beacon of innovation, even if many enrollment management leaders strive for innovation on a daily basis.

Innovation plays a crucial role in strategic enrollment management (SEM) for several reasons:

- *Competitive Advantage:* In an increasingly competitive higher education landscape, innovative SEM

strategies can differentiate an institution from its competitors. Creative approaches to enrollment, retention, and student support can attract and retain students effectively.

- *Adaptation to Changing Demographics:* Demographic shifts, changes in student preferences, and evolving market demands require institutions to innovate in their SEM practices. Adapting to these changes through innovative approaches ensures that institutions remain relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse student populations.
- *Enhanced Student Experience:* Innovation in SEM can lead to improvements in the overall student experience, from the initial enrollment process to graduation and beyond. Implementing innovative technologies, support services, and engagement initiatives can create a more seamless and fulfilling educational journey for students.
- *Data-Informed Decision Making:* Innovation often involves leveraging data analytics and technology to gain insights into student behavior, preferences, and outcomes. By adopting innovative data-driven approaches, institutions can make more informed decisions in areas such as enrollment strategies, financial aid allocation, and academic program offerings.
- *Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness:* Innovative SEM practices can streamline administrative processes, optimize resource allocation, and improve operational efficiency. This, in turn, can lead to cost savings and a more sustainable financial model for institutions, allowing them to invest resources in areas that directly impact student success.

Overall, innovation in strategic enrollment management is essential for institutions to adapt to evolving trends, enhance student outcomes, and maintain competitiveness in a dynamic higher education landscape.

Enable Others to Act

Empowering your enrollment team is crucial to their success. Provide them with the resources, training, and support needed to excel in their roles. Encourage auton-

omy and decision-making within their portfolios and territories, allowing them to tailor their approaches to specific responsibilities, markets, and audiences. Building collaborative partnerships is equally important. Foster connections and teamwork between your enrollment management division and other university departments, such as admissions, marketing, financial aid, and academic units. Cross-functional collaboration can lead to more holistic and effective enrollment efforts.

Empowering your team and granting them autonomy is important for several reasons:

- *Fostering Creativity and Innovation:* Empowered team members are more likely to think creatively and propose innovative solutions to challenges. When individuals feel trusted and empowered to make decisions, they are motivated to contribute their ideas and expertise.
- *Increased Motivation and Engagement:* Autonomy gives team members a sense of ownership over their work, leading to increased motivation and engagement. When individuals have the freedom to make decisions and take ownership of tasks, they are more invested in achieving success.
- *Improved Problem Solving:* Empowered teams are better equipped to handle unexpected situations and solve problems efficiently. When team members have the autonomy to assess situations and make decisions based on their expertise, they can respond quickly and effectively to challenges as they arise.
- *Developing Leadership Skills:* Granting autonomy provides opportunities for team members to develop leadership skills and take on more responsibility. When individuals are empowered to make decisions and take initiative, they gain valuable experience in leadership and decision-making.
- *Enhanced Collaboration and Trust:* Empowering your team fosters a culture of collaboration and trust. When team members feel trusted and supported, they are more likely to collaborate effectively with colleagues, share ideas openly, and work toward common goals.

Overall, empowering your team and granting them autonomy not only leads to increased creativity, motivation, and problem-solving but also fosters a positive and collaborative work environment where individuals can thrive and contribute to the organization's success.

Encourage the Heart

Recognizing and celebrating achievements is a key element of motivating and sustaining your enrollment team. Regularly acknowledge the hard work and dedication they put into their roles. Celebrate milestones, such as meeting enrollment targets, achieving diversity and inclusion goals, or implementing successful enrollment campaigns. Beyond celebrating team achievements, share and celebrate the stories of individual students who have been recruited through your division. Highlight their personal and academic successes, as these stories demonstrate the real impact of your enrollment efforts and inspire your team to continue their vital work.

Any healthy organization recognizes achievements because we share in these successes together. Enrollment management is hard work and oftentimes thankless. You are criticized when things do not go well and not always recognized when you perform exceedingly well. That is why it is important for leadership to recognize the wins both big and small.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the landscape of higher education is undergoing significant shifts, demanding adaptability and innovation from enrollment management and campus leaders. As we navigate these volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times, it becomes imperative to equip ourselves with effective leadership strategies. Drawing from my experiences in two senior enrollment officer roles, I've found immense value in two texts, notably *Leadership in Higher Education* by Kouzes and Posner. This book underscores five key practices of exemplary leadership: Modeling the Way, Inspiring a Shared Vision, Challenging the Process, Enabling Others to Act, and Encouraging the Heart.

These practices aren't just theoretical constructs; they form the bedrock of effective leadership, particularly in

the context of enrollment management. By modeling values, inspiring a shared vision, challenging existing paradigms, empowering team members, and celebrating achievements, we foster a culture of excellence and collaboration within our organizations. Moreover, in the realm of enrollment management, innovation emerges as a critical driver of success. By embracing innovative strategies, we can adapt to changing demographics, enhance the student experience, and maintain a competitive edge in the higher education landscape.

In essence, empowering our teams, nurturing autonomy, and fostering a culture of innovation are paramount. Through these endeavors, we not only navigate the complexities of enrollment management but also cultivate resilient, motivated teams capable of achieving our shared vision for the future of higher education.

Applying these five leadership practices to your enrollment management division will help create a motivated, innovative, and mission-driven team that contributes to the success of your higher education institution. At my current institution, the enrollment management leadership team recently read and discussed one of these two books. Our leadership team engages in a shared reading each quarter that is typically a book. For the first quarter of 2024, we chose *Leadership in Higher Education*. I had read an earlier version of the parent text from the same authors and felt that a higher education-focused text with this same framework would be highly beneficial. We are still developing as a team and engaging in these discussions along with other texts helps to develop us as leaders as well as scholar practitioners more broadly.

Specifically, each team member discussed and committed to working on one practice, and we each discussed what the leadership team as a whole could work on together. Each person getting out of their comfort zone to discuss individual and team development areas was beneficial to our ongoing development. For my own work, I focused my personal growth on areas that came from a 360 evaluation. With the size of our team, we had each of the five practices covered for both individual and team development, which showed that we have a thoughtful and diverse group of individuals. Since we

went through this exercise, we have continued to come back to the concepts when we are planning, working on projects, and communicating to our internal and campus stakeholders.

Healthy enrollment management organizations are ones of change. They are constantly evolving as well as

leading change on their campuses. Strong leadership within the organization helps to navigate the turbulent waters we face daily. Leaders come from every level of the organization and these two works help in developing more and better leaders.

References

Bennis, W., B. Nanus. 1985.
Leaders: Strategies for Taking.
Chicago: Harper & Row.

Kouzes, James M., and B. Z. Posner.
2019. *Leadership in Higher Education.*
Chicago: Berrett-Koehler.

Kouzes, J. M., and B. Z. Posner. 2023.
*The Leadership Challenge: How to
Make Extraordinary Things Happen in
Organizations.* Chicago: Jossey Bass.

About the Author



Jerry Ross

Jerry Ross currently serves as the Vice President for Enrollment Management at Marshall University and previously served as

the chief enrollment officer at California State University, Chico. He has three degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi including Doctor of Education where he wrote a dissertation on

the educational life of Frederick Douglass. His primary research interests are leadership, strategic planning, change management in enrollment management, and collaboration with campus partners.