



Dispatch

Reflections on Over a Decade of Academic Leadership: Promoting Kindness in Higher Education

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Introduction

Social justice has been core to my being since forever. I grew up in a family of teachers who were civically minded. I also served my community, played sports, and was an Army Cadet and co-founder of a co-educational junior Lions/Lioness group called Leo Club. My undergrad specialized in French Caribbean literature, and my BEd and MEd in teaching, second language instruction. My PhD from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, no surprise, specialized in social justice and cultural studies. As a researcher, I've always investigated niche areas, namely, marginalized men and masculinities and arts-based educational research. Over the years, I have held several leadership roles. I was founder and director of a research centre, the Northern Canadian Centre for Research in Education and the Arts (NORCCREA). Then I became Interim Chair of the Intermediate/Senior Division in Education. In recent years, I've been Chair of Graduate Studies in Education and university Chair of Learning Outcomes. During the global pandemic, I served as Associate Dean of Education and Professional Studies, a mammoth faculty of several programs with 4,400 students and 76 fulltime faculty.

Academe is based on a supposed culture of civility but simultaneously is a hot bed of competition. Beneath this benign surface lurks competition for research grants, competition for teaching certain courses and even scheduling times, rivalry for community service and teaching awards, and elections to serve on committees, where some win and some lose. It resembles a medieval court with nobles vying for favour with those who have more decision-making power (e.g., chairs, directors, associate deans, deans). Cliques are often formed, and insider/outsider status may ensue. As this is a culture of purported

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outward civility, incivility and indeed bullying tend to take more covert forms – silencing, gossip, innuendo, backstage character assassination, subtle put downs, or pointed disparaging of a colleague’s work in the guise of professional feedback during “in camera” committee deliberations, where the bully is immune to public scrutiny and repercussions. It can take just one pointed comment on a committee to derail a professor’s committee membership, application for a grant or award, or to set the stage for remorseless questioning of tenure and promotion. One should not underestimate the petty delight or schadenfreude of colleagues or a supervisor in exercising their power to put down a colleague they feel has slighted them. However, it can also take just one colleague or leader in such a nefarious situation to speak up and reset the bullying tone to one of fairness and equity.

Hole (2020) says that “organizations focus on the wrong soft skills, selecting leaders on confidence rather than competence, charisma rather than humility, and narcissism rather than integrity.” McDaniel (2019, pp. 56-58) defines a *pastoral leader* as someone who is “thoughtful, deliberate and patient” while the “police”-type is intuitive, quick and astute, resolving issues with a firm, no-nonsense approach. Reflecting on my years in low to mid-level university administrative roles, my driving goal is to be equitable, to empower others, and to speak up as needed when social justice is derailed – a facilitator or pastoral leader as opposed to a policing sort, although the latter approach is sometimes required in high pressure environments. As a queer person with a chronic disease, I am acutely aware from both personal experience and my research that in academe, as in broader society, many individuals are othered, silenced, and meet with punitive measures when they dare speak up to challenge the status quo. Within an academic culture of competition, egotism, silencing, and bullying, two questions guide this paper: (1) Who are the typical targets of academic bullying? (2) How can we promote a culture of trust, transparency and collaboration? I offer strategies for hope, inclusion, and kindness.

Who are the Typical Targets of Academic Bullying?

Do not stick around in a place or around people who have clearly shown you that they do not value you. To value skills, experience, even aesthetics, people have to have a certain value system and experience. They need to have standards. It doesn’t matter if you’re the best of the best. If you walk into a place where incompetence is valued as a means to keep insecure people safe... you become a threat to them. It doesn’t matter how much you give and how much you fix the issues that are detrimental to them, they’ll take everything that you offer them, then turn around and mob you because you have triggered their fragility, their not enoughness. You cannot facilitate betterment and improvement in an environment with people who are too insecure to let go of mediocrity. Do not cast pearls before swine.

Julia Cha (<https://juliacha.com>)

The typical targets of bullying behaviours include (Stokes & Klein, 2008):

- ethical and just people with high standards;
- independent, skilled, bright, and talented people with integrity;
- cooperative “nice” people;
- marginalized or vulnerable people, such as those with a disability, those from another country, or those who are somehow unlike everyone else.

Among those who “stick out” these may be more attractive people with so-called “sex appeal,” people who have perceived wealth, or even fame from their research (Cassell, 2011). Ultimately, those high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, creativity and integrity may be at odds with less scrupulous colleagues and with the types of corporate caricatures who increasingly dominate in university and especially administrative positions.

Academic bullies tend to score high in Machiavellian traits, those of narcissism and sociopathy, and are better avoided whenever possible. To be specific, workplace bullies tend to be unusually manipulative moving targets. They are adept at dodging responsibility, gaslighting, and engaging in mobbing (e.g., turning others against you). They will gossip, use character assassination, and innuendo to portray you as the villain, gaining support from others and destroying your reputation. Such people lack self-awareness, morality, and are quite happy to ride on your tailcoats in research, teaching, or community service, should you peer with them, and to take credit when you have done most of the work. They are often superficially charming, so it may take you a while to see their true, opportunistic selves. Should you cut off the narcissistic supply of milk, look out. The narcissistic bully may very well come after you.

In higher education, “Truth” and the pursuit of social justice can be a dangerous endeavour. When you speak the truth, it discomfits others. People guard a tacit understanding of unspoken truths and to speak up may elicit discomfort and insecurities, and have financial costs for you, the Truth-Sayer. Those with Machiavellian traits are destructive and tend to have negative organizational impact (Belschak et al., 2018). They guard against many unspoken truths, which if challenged may uncover their darker traits, require their self-reflection, and call upon their minimal or non-existent sympathy and compassion for others. Since their compassion and sympathy are brittle or even non-existent, and self-reflection is anathema to them, they may engage in superficial and reluctant support of social justice endeavours, such as kindness and Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Indigenization (EDII) endeavours. Typically, if they claim to be on board for EDII and kindness, they will support any plans superficially and without proper resources, human or otherwise, and thus, these projects are doomed to failure, thereby keeping them in power.

How can we Promote a Culture of Trust, Transparency and Collaboration?

Academe is a culture of high stakes self-discipline and competition. Academe is also referred to as a culture of introverts, and I wonder about the correlation

between introversion, the lone wolf phenomenon, and vulnerability. People spend 10 to 15 years earning their degrees, culminating with a doctorate. The doctoral process can be brutal, with nearly half of doctoral students never completing their degree (Maddox, 2017). The competition for a tenure track position is equally fierce. Should a person be one of the few to obtain a tenure track position, the journey to become tenured may be a stressful eye opener, with advice to “keep your head down and your nose clean.” One must demonstrate a compelling record of research, teaching, and community service. Internal and external research grants are exceptionally competitive. Junior faculty must be wary of how they are perceived by tenured faculty. They will not want to insult anyone or get on their bad side. Tenured faculty hold sway in deciding who gets research grants, and they serve on the tenure and promotion committees. When a tenure track faculty member asks how many book chapter, books, and journal articles are “enough,” they may hear some version of “enough is never enough.” In this high stakes culture, universities mirror a punishing corporate culture of work, work, work, and be “everything to everyone.” By the time some academics are granted tenure, they may already exhibit symptoms of burnout having endured years of silencing and intricate politics.

Let’s imagine a culture where kindness takes the place of competition. The INFJ Myers-Briggs individual is idealistic, principled, and humanistic, often referred to as the “Advocate.”¹ As a self-admitted INFJ, integrity is part of my DNA. I find it very difficult to go along with the crowd when I have analyzed the data and see discrepancies with commonly held opinions, even if this may lead to a test of my allegiance or loyalty to an individual or group. This core ethical side of me, and the high standards I espouse, along with a cooperative, “nice” nature, make me an anomaly among current models of leadership in higher education.

Vanderfeen (2022) refers to lateral violence as violence from within (i.e., from members of the group and towards members of the group) that is overt and covert in Indigenous communities. It consists of “repeated, unwelcome, and destructive actions designed to humiliate and upset the recipient” (Vessey & Williams, 2020, p. 20). This may take the form of symbolic violence, such as disapproving facial and body language and silencing, to more overt insults and belittling. As a pastoral leader, I am inspired by *lateral kindness* (First Nations Health Authority et al., n.d.). Brown (2022) says:

A lateral kindness warrior is a person who fights for kindness. It is a person who chooses to be kind even when people and the world can be unkind, someone who always keeps the sacred teaching of love in their forethought. They always care about others and are ferociously compassionate. A lateral kindness warrior never tolerates lateral violence, intimidation or disrespect, and always stands up for those who don’t have a voice.

¹ For more information see <https://eu.themyersbriggs.com/en/tools/MBTI/MBTI-personality-Types/INFJ>

I do not think of myself a lateral kindness warrior but rather as a *pastoral leader*. The word “warrior” is wrought with warlike and combative connotations. However, if like me you aspire to working with others in a manner that is infused with kindness, compassion, respect and integrity, these approaches may help.

Use Lateral Kindness to Chair Meetings and Projects

As a long-time educator, I have used cooperative learning strategies for over 30 years. Elect a leader for a committee or project who is responsible for collaboratively establishing a positive climate, appropriate behaviours, helping committee members embrace civility, and addressing appropriate conflict management skills (Vessey & Williams, 2020, p. 23). You may ask committee members to brainstorm times when committee work excelled and times when they were ineffective, to pinpoint which behaviours and communications strategies were used in both instances. I brainstorm with members to outline goals for completion of a committee project and also behavioural expectations, such as: “everyone will have voice and contribute and no one will monopolize discussions”; “active listening”; “let’s put aside cell phone and focus our attention on each person who has the floor, one at a time.” I conclude a meeting with, “let’s each state one aspect of this meeting that we are grateful for” to help focus on the positive. I model how to disagree using a respectful tone and kindness (e.g., “I hear what you’re saying and appreciate it. However, have you also considered...”). Such practices not only reflect cooperative learning structures (Kagan & Kagan, 1997) and lateral kindness, but also the growing trend toward consensus building (Madden, 2017). Similarly, Bosetti (2020) shares:

An Australian university addressed their toxic organizational culture by collaboratively developing cultural quality indicators (settling on “connected, caring, collaborative and innovative”). All executive and faculty meetings begin with colleagues sharing positive examples of these qualities in action. Examples are showcased and celebrated in newsletters and at events. Staff, faculty members and workplace teams are acknowledged for their contributions as cultural champions.

Ultimately, the associate dean and dean, equipped with the appropriate leadership tools of empathy, humility, and equity, can help set the tone for a kinder and more respectful climate. It would be helpful to elect a committee who can examine literature on lateral kindness and share the key points with faculty. Part of this endeavour might include how to approach critical and confrontational discussions.

Embracing Truthful Conversations is Crucial to Pastoral Leadership, and Promotes Equity, Respect and Kindness

McNair et al. (2022, pp. 93-94) purport that truthful conversations can develop critical relationships and a level of shared accountability for addressing biases. They offer sample guiding questions to increase this self- and institutional awareness:

- What processes do you utilize to share personal narratives to embrace truth-telling and to promote relationship building?
- How does your institutional value and affirm students' cultural identities? What biases or stereotypes may be standing in their way?
- What are the ways your institution supports a campus culture of caring for students and their success?
- What are you doing to support student well-being?
- What can you learn from a deeper examination of your actions, preconceived notions, and assumption on your journey to improve student success? (p. 94)

As an educational leader, you may replace “students” with “colleagues,” “staff”, or “faculty” in these sample questions. Engaging in ongoing, truthful conversations of this ilk holds the promise of forging a faculty or campus culture that is more truthful, respectful, kind, and transformative.

Share Vulnerabilities and Failures

People are prone to comparisons with others. You saved and bought a nice new car? You plan to spend your sabbatical in Vienna scouring old archives? Your child was just accepted to a prestigious medical school, and you've invested the money to pay for several years tuition? Contemplate the adage, “be careful who you share good news with” (Peterson, 2019). Robert Greene, in his best seller, *The 48 Laws of Power* (2000), problematizes “envy” in “Law 46, Never Appear Too Perfect” as follows:

Appearing better than others is always dangerous, but most dangerous of all is to appear to have no faults or weaknesses. Envy creates silent enemies. It is smart to occasionally display defects, and admit to harmless vices, in order to deflect envy and appear more human and approachable. Only gods and the dead can seem perfect with impunity. (p. 400)

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard (1941, p. 139) says that “admiration is happy self-surrender but envy is unhappy self-assertion.” Academic bullies who score high in Machiavellian traits often exhibit malicious envy. Smith (2018) refers to malicious envy as an “ugly brew of inferiority, frustration, and resentment [that] can breed a singularly shameful hostility.” Malicious envy can lead to destructive acts towards the person targeted. Research indicates that sharing failures can mitigate the spread of malicious envy in higher education:

In early 2016, Princeton University professor Johannes Haushofer posted a “CV of failures” on his professional website. In this document, he listed positions and awards for which he had applied and been rejected in his career (Stefan, 2010). When asked about the decision to publicize his failures, Haushofer explained, “Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible. I have noticed that this sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me. As a result, they are more likely to attribute their own failures to themselves, rather than the fact that the world is stochastic, applications are crapsheets, and selection committees and referees have bad days” (Brooks et al., 2019, p. 687)

Therefore, prudently divulging failures and flaws at the water cooler may mitigate envy to some extent. That damn paper you spent months on was again sent back for more tedious revisions. Your SSHRC application, which took months of careful planning, was poorly scored by a random committee member who clearly doesn’t understand your field. You got your student opinion surveys back and a student who had a bee in their bonnet clearly influenced several classmates to annihilate you in their ratings and comments. Showing your human flaws, risks and failures, not being perfect in a system that demands excellence, may mitigate the mythos surrounding those whom others may consider as having enviable status symbols or career successes.

Structure Core Committees

All faculty members are required to conduct committee work in their department or faculty, which is usually 20% of their job. If you are a person who espouses kindness, compassion, and collaboration, and your “asshole radar” (i.e., detection of people with Machiavellian traits) is finely tuned, be proactive in service on certain core committees where your ideals of lateral kindness may be useful to the long-term positive climate or ethos of your faculty. Hiring committees tend to choose individuals who reflect their own personalities and interpersonal approaches, both negative and positive. Therefore, endeavour to populate your department with like-minded individuals. Consider serving on strategic planning committees and aim to promote lateral kindness as a core value of your department, faculty, and institution. Likewise, if you are a tenured faculty member, Senate and search committees for middle and senior university administrators (e.g., dean, vice-president/provost, and president searches) would be a worthy endeavour. I recommend recruiting like-minded colleague as allies to serve on these committees and to support these ideals. There is strength in numbers. Use your thoughtful voice. However, be forewarned that high stakes committees are often stacked by senior administration with “nodding dolls” – malleable faculty and staff who will go along with the will of a narcissistic boss or chair. According to Hole (2020), “if there is no room to have other perspectives than

the view of the boss, just get out of there and not waste your time on someone who does not deserve it.”

Conclusions

In sum, promoting kindness is complex within a university culture of competition, egotism, silencing and bullying. However, there are multiple ways to promote a kinder culture with shared vision, personal and collective accountability, where people can disagree but maintain respectful relationships. Embracing lateral kindness has the potential to counteract the more nefarious inclinations of students, staff, faculty and administrators. Truthful conversations will discomfit people but this is a natural offshoot of the process of personal and collective growth. Sharing vulnerabilities and failures is not just part of shattering the mythos of the academic star but also critical to the processes of lateral kindness and truthful conversations, where not just research acumen may be lauded but also moments and evidence of humanity. Pragmatically, you may also aim to structure committees, and the endless cycle of peer assessment, with individuals directed towards lateral kindness. Lateral kindness is messy and if not embraced by your associate dean and dean (and other higher ups), toxicity may overwhelm even the most conscientious faculty member.

Therefore, I conclude with a caution. While I always strive to offer strategies for hope, inclusion, and kindness, I am cognizant that competition, domination, and hierarchy have infused the infrastructure of universities for decades (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2020, p. 5), despite the increased call for collegiality and social justice. Even the most principled university administrators, including deans and associate deans, may themselves incur incivility and bullying as they attempt to navigate the tangled demands of both faculty and higher ups. With a decade of university administration, I am aware that university administrative positions are rigorous, with a higher than ever turnover rate. Workplace incivility and depersonalization may have been running rampant for years due to poor leadership, disgruntled senior faculty members who have given up or use their influence in unhealthy ways, and the increasingly paradoxical demands of chairs, directors, associate deans, deans, provosts, and presidents to not only become transformative curriculum leaders but to simultaneously adopt lucrative programming (e.g., online programs that generate money), the controversial development of programs for international students in increasingly underfunded institutions due to freezing of government funding, and pressure to raise funds from corporate sponsors. In such cases, a humanistic climate or ethos may have already been lost when the administrator is mandated to prioritize raising money over curriculum leadership and governance integrity. Your bully may even be your director, chair, or direct supervisor, and many faculty have no training in leadership before or after

being appointed to these roles. A toxic environment may have been brewing for years.

Ultimately, no strategies or approaches are fool proof, including lateral kindness, particularly when a narcissistic colleague or administrator has you in their sights. Should you confront them, it is commonplace for your workplace tormentor to counterattack that you are the problem, or to make a complaint to Human Resources following your institution's anti-harassment policy. Your anti-harassment policy may call for mediation to resolve issues but there is no resolution when dealing with narcissists or sociopaths, for they lack accountability and believe that they are never wrong. You will have to document and defend yourself which often calls for a mountain of paperwork, emails, explanations, and tense meetings. You may opt for pricey legal assistance. When your antagonist is a colleague, your union may feel obliged to equally represent you both. Your antagonist may lie, manipulate, and throw you under the bus with nary a blink. People with narcissistic or sociopathic tendencies are unusually skilled at playing the victim when it suits their purposes.

If you confront the bully or follow university polices for reporting harassment and bullying, gaslighting and DARVO may result. Gaslighting is a form of psychological warfare whereby the perpetrator attempts to make the victim, and others to whom they may have reported the abuse (e.g., HR or the dean), question the victim's credibility and the veracity of their complaints. DARVO is an offshoot of gaslighting (Travers, 2024), which stands for "Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender," and is a common ploy of academic bullies. The goal of the bully is to wear you down – mentally, physically, and even financially if you seek legal support, in the hope that you may back off or even resign, and for them to garner sympathy and power. Your immediate supervisors (e.g., the chair, director, associate dean or dean), may be disinclined to become involved. For instance, when you make your associate dean or dean aware of bullying, this may spark grievances or debates over academic freedom; associate deans or deans may be wary of alerting more senior administrator for fear of appearing weak or incompetent; the bullying may be hard to pinpoint; and administrators may find their hands tied in disciplining wayward subordinates (Bosetti, 2020). Furthermore, the supervisors themselves may become a target of the bully or bullies. Therefore, they often defer to Human Resources, whose role is to protect the university from harm or lawsuits. Expecting an impartial, well-informed, or expedient resolution will likely be naïve. Literature in academe on workplace anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies reveals that these policies have had little to no discernible effect (Tauber et al., 2022).

If you are a talented, conscientious scholar, your inclination in the workplace may be to edify, to resolve issues, to share your knowledge and skills, to improve the environment, and to help others. Tread carefully. Matthew 7:6 says, "do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and turn and tear you to pieces."

Choose with whom you share your gifts with caution and discernment. Unfortunately, your good intentions may backfire, leaving you the target of bullies who attack you, who aim to destroy your sense of self, and even to ruin your career. Given the power of gaslighting, silencing, and manipulative strategies of skilled bullies, you may start to question your sanity like so many before you. In a toxic environment, it is not weakness to retreat or even to leave your job, when toxicity, depersonalization, and burnout run rampant. If you cannot ignore, block, or limit interactions with workplace “assholes,” Sutton (2007), an expert in workplace bullying, suggests quitting and moving on. As with martial arts, your best defence may be to retreat to maintain your health and kind principles. Is it worth the time, effort, and mental anguish to endeavour to become an “anti-narcissist warrior”? Probably not. This effort may well destroy you. Bullies may block any hope of progress, promotion, or peace of mind, and the work environment may be entrenched with toxicity at all levels. If you can, avoid or limit working with bullies (e.g., serving on committees, engaging in joint research), then do so. If this is not possible, it may be wise to switch jobs within your institution or, indeed, to seek a new job elsewhere.

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