

Positive Academic Leadership: How to Stop Putting Out Fires and Start Making a Difference

by *Buller J.L.*

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[Buller's \(2013\)](#) book *Positive Academic Leadership: How to Stop Putting Out Fires and Start Making a Difference* caters for both aspiring and experienced leaders in higher education. It gives new insights and practical strategies to help them interpret their roles differently and foster a more constructive and positive leadership style. This is based on Buller's personal leadership experience, recent scholarly research and a wide range of resources. Throughout his book, Buller provides readers with a set of scenarios, case studies, exercises and thought experiments to help put theory into practice, as well as prompt administrators to identify their core values and reflect on their own practices.

Overview

In his book, Buller highlights the fact that leadership in higher education requires different strategies than that in corporations or schools. This is because shared governance and collegiality play a much more important role in higher education, where hierarchy is more fluid due to the frequency with which administrators rise from and return to faculty positions.

According to Buller, positive academic leadership is not only about thinking positively and having a good attitude. It is about focusing on the strengths and successes of the department and on the capabilities of its individuals to develop what is already working well, rather than focusing strictly on weaknesses and solving problems. Despite the significant challenges in higher education, positive academic leaders base their practices on hope, joy, resilience, commitment to service and appreciative inquiry. All of which lead to positive change to bring about greater benefits in the long run. This requires creating a



positive academic environment for all stakeholders through positive language, positive perspective and positive strategies, which in turn increases productivity.

Positive academic leaders use positive language when talking about themselves and in their day-to-day interactions with others. Such interactions lead to positive changes in attitude and reactions to situations, and they increase morale, retention and productivity among employees. Positive academic leaders approach setbacks with a positive perspective as lessons or opportunities to learn. They derive positive outcomes from negative or challenging situations. In addition, they slow reaction time to examine each challenge and the consequences of a response or decision from multiple perspectives. Positive academic leaders implement positive strategies that respond to the needs and desires of their team by maximizing their teams' capability and capacity, inspiring them to find innovative ways of achieving their goals and contributing to the future success of their unit.

Buller also suggests that academic leaders act as coaches, counselors and conductors to help individuals develop a more positive approach toward their role in higher education. This includes motivating their team to achieve ambitious goals through empowerment, constructive criticism, offering them what they need and getting them to work together harmoniously as a complex orchestra or ecosystem. Moreover, he indicates that a positive approach for higher education as a whole is to lead upward and laterally. This means that academic leaders should perceive their roles as part of the larger system and advocate for the needs of everyone who works at the institution rather than only being concerned with their unit. Such an approach would contribute to institutional productivity and growth.

Negative academic leaders in the USA assume that American higher education is in crisis. They claim that it is deeply flawed and that its quality and standards continue to decline, causing a drastic decrease in student interest and enrollment. To contradict this, Buller presented evidence that more students are enrolled in American universities than ever before. He explains that the positive approaches in leading departments, colleges or universities could be also implemented in higher education by focusing on what is working well rather than identifying problems but without neglecting those problems. He also suggests that positive academic leaders can reform and improve higher education by putting claims of crisis and failure into context. This requires one to be candid about the challenges in higher education rather than viewing them as a crisis, adopt a systems approach and play to their strengths rather than fixating on their weaknesses.

Critique

Buller thoughtfully designed this book to be a toolbox of resources for his readers, packed with a plethora of examples and practical strategies. Sometimes with so many resources, it is hard to organize your toolbox; however, broad themes that start with self and institution then move to the larger community/society allow the reader to focus on his/her area of greatest need. The journey begins with a narrow application of positive academic leadership introspectively "Approaches for Yourself," then continues to demonstrate its impact externally to one's institution, "Approaches for Faculty, Staff and Students" and finally the broader community, "Approaches for Higher Education as a Whole." On the other hand, a visual organizer or roadmap of the various strategies would be a helpful addition to guide readers through the numerous tools. This would also allow the book to become a more organized clearinghouse of information that can be referenced as needed in one's professional and leadership journey.

Although there is a section that addresses approaches for faculty, staff and students, there is very little reference for the ways in which students can benefit from having a positive academic leader. It is relatively clear that positive approaches to education can have

positive impacts on all stakeholders. Buller alludes to research that supports the use of positive language and reinforcement to improve the likelihood of students meeting classroom expectations. Nonetheless, more emphasis on approaches for students is lacking especially when students are at the core mission of higher education.

Overall, Buller successfully makes the case for adopting more positive approaches in all areas of education. Many examples are angled from a Western perspective, but the principles transcend cultural boundaries. Buller presents practices that allow for reflection and consideration of the cultural context of an institution. In addition, it is incumbent upon readers to challenge and redefine the scope of leadership. A broader definition of leadership is helpful to demonstrate how such a salient topic could be applicable to an array of education professionals. Readers should explore how to adopt positive academic leadership approaches as contributors to the higher education experience and not limit leadership responsibilities to the role of university presidents, deans and chairs. The approaches presented by Buller on positive academic leadership are written in a brilliant way that makes them applicable and relevant to any K-12 or higher education faculty or staff member at all levels of an organization.

Takeaways for faculty and students

Teachers are academic leaders in their classrooms, and positive academic leadership is crucial to maintain students' enthusiasm and keep them motivated. Students go through a roller coaster of emotions, frustrations, stress and anxiety throughout the semester. To optimize motivation, teachers need to create an environment that is safe, accessible, personalized and empowering (Palmer, 2007). Buller highlights multiple ways for academic leaders to deal with faculty that can easily be transferred to students as well.

In his book, Buller emphasizes the significant impact of positive language, perspective and strategies on creating a positive academic environment. A similar approach can be applied in the classroom as most students are more likely to work at a level that would meet their teacher's expectations. Teachers should help increase the morale and self-efficacy of students throughout the semester by praising performance and fostering abilities rather than criticizing behaviors and actions. This will help increase motivation in students to become more self-reliant and risk-takers (Blazer and Kraft, 2017). Buller also identifies goal-setting as a crucial step in achieving success and increasing productivity, and he provides ways to achieve it. Similarly, teachers setting realistic goals with their students is imperative for students' success. The goals should focus on specific objectives that each student wants to achieve and outline what they are currently doing to align with these goals.

Positive perspectives are also important in higher education. Buller suggests, in certain situations, one should pause and think about the emotional perspective to increase solutions. He emphasizes that the purpose of college is to make people's dreams come true. Teachers constantly encounter situations with students that could make them aggravated. Perspectives need to change from disciplinary or corrective responses to looking for opportunities and fostering capabilities. Such an approach would help develop more possibilities. Teachers should be aware of their emotional experiences and optimize it to promote students' achievements (Goetz and Hall, 2013). Teachers need to think of strategies to incorporate personal characteristics, backgrounds and goals as a way to positively deal with arising issues throughout the semester. The ultimate goal is to maintain a positive experience for students and restore energy when they feel burnt out from stressors around them.

Implementing positive strategies will help make positive leadership the default approach, which in turn will help create skillful practices. A teacher's core values define who

they are. Identifying core principles is key to teachers' and students' happiness, optimism and success. Authentic teachers act according to their core values to help them see possibilities and seek effective solutions when dealing with students' concerns. Buller identifies three positive strategies that can be adopted by teachers, i.e. coaching, counseling and conducting.

Teachers can coach and counsel their students by inspiring confidence in them, particularly during stressful periods. This can be done by appreciating their work, using a reward system, conveying confidence in them, communicating frequently and promptly and criticizing constructively when needed. By doing so, teachers are raising the bar and empowering their students to achieve their highest possible potential. Buller suggests leaders can also act as conductors inspiring performance as a system rather than individuals. As conductors, teachers should invest in each student's attributes and strengths to holistically enhance the classroom learning experience. They should think of the classroom as an orchestra. To conduct in harmony, they should trust each student's abilities and foster leadership responsibilities for the class to run smoothly as a whole.

Conclusion

Buller not only focuses on the theoretical realm but also details how these concepts can be applied within various contexts and at multiple administrative levels. As the current dean at a US-based university, Buller provides insights and advice from his personal leadership experiences and highlights the important lessons garnered. These takeaways encompass the overall principles of the book which are to develop solution-focused approaches; have forward-looking perspectives; build upon strengths; engage in positive communication; identify opportunities; empower others; use positive reinforcements; and create collaborative environments. In summary, the book elucidates approaches and creates a reading and learning experience that is relatable to all in academia.

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