

The Managed Heart: Sustaining Leadership in Higher Education

Evidence-Based Strategies for Navigating the
Emotional Demands of Academic Administration

The Leader's Workload is an Iceberg



The emotional dimension of leadership—often invisible in organizational charts—is a critical but under-examined aspect of higher education administration. Our goal is to move this invisible work into organizational consciousness.

The Three Faces of Emotional Labor in Academic Leadership



Surface Acting

Managing outward expressions even when inner feelings differ.

In Practice

A department chair smiling through a contentious faculty meeting. A dean projecting enthusiasm for an initiative despite private doubts.



Deep Acting

Actively modifying internal feelings to align with role expectations.

In Practice

A provost consciously cultivating genuine excitement about strategic planning to inspire campus participation.



Emotional Dissonance

The psychological tension when required emotional displays conflict with authentic feelings.

In Practice

A vice president projecting calm authority during a campus crisis while experiencing genuine fear or uncertainty. This depletes cognitive and emotional resources.

The Hidden Costs: How Unmanaged Emotions Erode an Institution



Leadership Turnover & Instability

Emotional demands drive administrators from their positions, creating costly transition periods. Presidential searches alone can cost **\$100,000 to \$300,000** in direct expenses, with far higher indirect costs.



Decision Quality Degradation

Emotional depletion impairs executive function. Leaders may default to simpler heuristics and miss important context precisely when sophisticated judgment is needed most.



Relationship Deterioration

Sustained emotional labor can be perceived as inauthenticity, eroding the trust with faculty, staff, and students that is essential for effective governance.



Innovation Suppression & Culture Erosion

Emotionally exhausted leaders retreat to maintenance priorities, avoiding the risks of innovation. Their emotional patterns propagate, creating cultures where authenticity becomes risky.

The Personal Toll: The Human Impact of an Invisible Burden



Psychological Strain & Burnout

Chronic emotional dissonance contributes to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and detachment from work that once felt meaningful.

Physical Health Consequences



The stress of sustained emotional management affects cardiovascular health, immune function, and sleep quality. These are not 'part of the job'; they are indicators of unsustainable demands.



Identity & Authenticity Conflicts

When professional life requires constant emotional performance, leaders can experience confusion about their authentic selves and values, particularly for women and leaders from underrepresented backgrounds.

Relational Spillover



Psychological resources depleted at work are not immediately replenished, affecting personal relationships. Leaders can be perceived as emotionally absent or depleted by family and partners.

The Path Forward: An Evidence-Based Framework for Action

Institutions can move from invisible burden to shared commitment by implementing five interconnected strategies.

1. ****Transparent Communication****

- Making emotional labor a legitimate topic.



2. ****Procedural Justice****

- Creating clarity, fairness, and realistic expectations.



3. ****Leadership Capability Building****

- Developing emotional intelligence as a core competency.



4. ****Structural Role Design****

- Distributing the emotional load, not just the tasks.



5. ****Holistic Support Systems****

- Providing tangible resources for wellbeing and recovery.

Strategy 1: Make it Legitimate Through Transparent Communication

The foundational intervention is creating a culture where the emotional aspects of leadership are openly acknowledged and discussable.

Actionable Tactics



Include emotional competencies in job descriptions and evaluations.



Establish regular leader forums or peer coaching circles to discuss emotional challenges.



Incorporate realistic previews of emotional demands into leadership onboarding.

Case in Point

Vanderbilt University: Implemented structured peer consultation groups for department chairs, facilitated by organizational psychologists, to treat emotional dimensions of leadership as legitimate topics for professional development.

University of Michigan (NCID): Developed programs that explicitly address the emotional dimensions of diversity work, reducing isolation and providing practical self-care strategies.

Strategy 2: Create Fairness and Clarity in Roles and Processes

Perceptions of **fair processes** and **clear expectations** significantly reduce the emotional strain of leadership roles.

Actionable Tactics



Clarify decision rights and authority boundaries in written governance documents.



Involve administrators in designing policies that affect their roles.



Establish transparent processes for investigating and resolving complaints.

Case in Point

The Ohio State University

A workload audit revealed department chairs spent **15-20 hours weekly** on “emotional and relational work.” This data led to restructuring teaching loads and adding administrative support, acknowledging the role’s actual demands.

Emory University

Implemented “role clarity conversations” between deans and chairs to create shared understanding of both technical and relational/emotional expectations.

Strategy 3: Build Capability with Focused Development

Rather than assuming leaders possess emotional competencies, institutions should invest in developing these skills systematically.

Actionable Tactics



Use validated assessments (e.g., Emotional Intelligence) for personalized development plans.



Provide skill-building workshops on specific challenges like delivering difficult feedback or managing crisis anxiety.



Offer executive coaching to navigate specific emotional challenges and develop coping strategies.

Case in Point

Cornell University

A leadership program for associate deans includes a module on “leading through relationships,” with skill practice for emotionally charged conversations and strategies for maintaining boundaries.

University of California System

Invests in executive coaching for senior leaders, framing it as a professional development resource to navigate the complex emotional terrain of their roles.

Strategy 4: Redesign the Load with Structural and Distributed Models

Examine how leadership roles are structured and whether emotional labor demands can be redistributed more sustainably.

Actionable Tactics



Implement team-based leadership models (e.g., co-deans, leadership triads) to provide built-in peer support.



Create boundary-spanning roles like ombudspersons or conflict resolution specialists to absorb specialized emotional work.



Support time-limited leadership rotations with robust transition support.

Case in Point

Oberlin College

Created senior associate dean roles focused on faculty development and wellbeing, absorbing much of the emotional support work previously falling to chairs and deans.

Georgetown University

Experimented with co-chair models in large departments, pairing faculty with complementary emotional and strategic skills to reduce isolation and leverage strengths.

Strategy 5: Provide Tangible Support for Wellbeing and Renewal

Acknowledging that emotional labor has real costs requires providing tangible resources that signal a genuine organizational commitment to sustainability.

Actionable Tactics



- Offer comprehensive wellness benefits, including robust mental health coverage and stress management resources.



- Extend sabbatical concepts to administrators for periodic renewal after sustained service.



- Provide transition support (e.g., career counseling) for leaders stepping down from high-stress roles.

Case in Point

Arizona State University: The 'Administrative Renewal Fellowship' provides semester-long, paid sabbaticals for administrators after five years of service, explicitly for recovery and renewal.

Stanford University: Expanded its Faculty Staff Help Center to explicitly serve administrators, using "support center" language to reduce stigma and increase utilization by leaders.

Building Long-Term Capacity I: Recalibrating the Psychological Contract

The unwritten expectations between the institution and its leaders must be updated to make emotional labor visible and valued.

From an Old Contract...

- Emotional labor is invisible and managed privately.
- Leadership is a “duty” one must endure.
- Sustainability is an individual’s responsibility.



...To a New Contract

- **Emotional labor is legitimate work**, deserving of support, compensation, and recovery time.
- **Leadership is a specialized skill**, requiring investment in distinct competencies.
- **Sustainability is a shared responsibility**, reflecting an institutional duty of care.
- **This contract must be equitable**, acknowledging the differential emotional demands on women and leaders from underrepresented backgrounds.

Building Long-Term Capacity II: Developing Distributed Leadership

Long-term sustainability requires moving beyond heroic individual leadership models toward genuinely distributed approaches.

Structural Shifts



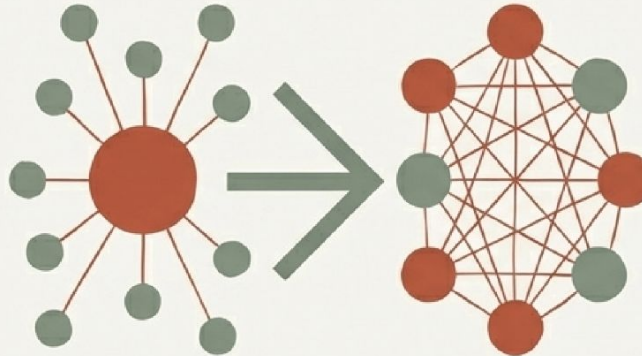
Design leadership systems with built-in redundancy and role overlap.



Develop explicit succession plans to ensure knowledge transfer.



Ensure critical institutional relationships are held by multiple people.



Cultural Shifts



Move from celebrating leaders who sacrifice personal wellbeing to valorizing sustainable contribution and boundary-setting.



Encourage senior leaders to model vulnerability, acknowledge uncertainty, and openly use support resources, creating cultural permission for others.

The Path Forward: From Invisible Burden to Shared Commitment

The goal is not to eliminate emotional demands, but to create conditions where leaders can engage in ways that are sustainable, authentic, and supported.

This work begins with a collective commitment to:



Acknowledgment

Speak honestly about the emotional dimensions of leadership. Treat this as real work deserving of recognition and support.



Investment

Allocate tangible resources—financial, structural, and developmental—that signal commitment beyond rhetoric.



Innovation

Experiment with new leadership models and build systems to capture and share the emerging wisdom about what makes leadership sustainable.

The future of higher education depends not just on attracting talent, but on creating the conditions for that talent to thrive.