Chapter 22
A First–Time Leader in the Time of COVID–19:
A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, a faculty member at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) shares their story of working as a white male in an all-Black college from first hire, to leaving, to returning in order to lead their former academic program. During their first year of leadership the author faced personal tragedy, professional promotion, strained relationships with colleagues, and finally, a global pandemic that changed the world. For those interested in the experiences of a first-time leader, this is a unique case study.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership, much like parenthood, is one of those experiences that you can never truly be wholly prepared for. There is, however, value in learning from the trials and tribulations of those who came before you. When asked to contribute to a book on first-time leaders, I, the author leapt at the opportunity. This chapter will cover twelve months in the life of a first time leader, plunged headfirst into one of the strangest confluences of events anyone could experience. In this chapter, we'll cover dealing with unmet expectations, personality conflicts, juggling multiple responsibilities, and dealing with crises both large and small. This is my personal story and observations. Names have been changed out of respect for privacy.

BACKGROUND

Prior to Leadership

I have worked in media and entertainment for my entire professional career. I first started in local radio, before transitioning into video production, which led into work in film and television. During the Great Recession (circa 2007-2009), the local media economy tanked, and I began looking at teaching. I had been very positively impacted by the teachers in their life and felt that there was something substantial I could contribute to academia.

In December 2010, I was hired as a teaching staff member at a historically Black university (HBCU). Now, I am white, and though race or gender should never be a consideration in hiring, I still had a sense of trepidation in stepping into a position where I would be a minority. I had gone to elementary, middle and high school in a predominantly Black school district, and at least had a basic understanding of Black culture.

It should also be emphasized, that I felt both respected and valued by my colleagues, both in the Media program I worked in, as well as among the faculty and staff of the greater English department. My supervisor, Harry, was a former TV producer, who preferred coming in after noon, and would work into the late hours of the evening. As a staff member, my assigned hours were 8:30-5, and this led to friction between myself and Harry.

In addition, Harry was terrible regarding submitting the proper forms and paperwork for the grant that funded the Media program. Thus, it became my responsibility to ensure all forms of paperwork were submitted on-time, often having to work around Harry's absences. It should be noted, Harry was a tenured Professor, meaning he was completely untouchable in terms of employee discipline.

Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose seminal work in the Scientific Management movement, had quite a bit to say on optimization and workflow. An important concept Taylor exposited was that workers and managers need to work in cooperation. (Taylor, 2014) I agree with Taylor, in that both sides of the employment relationship should focus on cooperation. We are all, in our own way, in this together. It's important that our interpersonal relationships focus on cooperative actions, working towards our shared goals. However, in this case the supervisor had no motivation, either externally or internally, to perform his supervisory duties.

To any students reading this, it's important to note that you will likely come across people who both make your life difficult and are completely immune to social consequences for their actions. In those types of situations, it's important to decide how you want to proceed. You can A) Leave, B) Fight back, or C) Do the necessary work. In this scenario, there are no easy answers. What I can recommend, however, is to understand that this type of leader is an example of what not to do. Learn from those around you, even those who are doing the wrong thing.

Harry's idea of verbal communication was to speak at a consistently loud volume, which the author interpreted as shouting. It was only years later that I realized something important: this was just how Harry spoke to everyone. However, as a new hire, this constant shouting was quite demoralizing. My colleagues in the Media program were Ron, a hardnosed newsman; Neville, a long-serving radio broadcaster; and Seamus who I had the pleasure of serving on the hiring committee for.

Neville and Seamus had both attended this particular HBCU for undergraduate studies, and the author was very appreciative of their insight and knowledge. Every school has their own unique politics, and an HBCU works in a particularly heightened environments, serving as a place for African Americans to

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