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## Transitioning out of Leadership: Is There Life After Higher Administration?

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Transitioning out of Leadership:  
Is There Life After Higher Administration?

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Abstract

This article showcases the case histories of three former higher education administrators who stepped down from their responsibilities to rejoin the faculty. From their collective experiences, they extracted the variables that tend to influence the change in professional trajectory. The authors explain how an assortment of cognitive biases can influence the success or failure of downward transitions. We conclude the article with suggestions regarding how to make a successful transition from academic administration back to faculty status.

### Transitioning out of Leadership:

#### Is There Life After Higher Administration?

There is an old adage about organizations that goes something like this: The workers you want to leave never do, and, if you don't treat them right, the best workers will be the ones to go. But does that relationship hold for managers or high level executives? For those in leadership positions, we tend to believe the worn-out retire, the incompetent are eventually let go, and the competent get lured away to the next higher paid position with a better title.

However, another possibility, one that is rarely discussed or studied, is that competent leaders sometimes move into another role in the same organization, typically one that does not focus on management or leadership. In organizations outside academia, managers become individual contributors, such as when a talented managing engineer returns to a project team. Having long ago achieved the coveted "tenure," departing leaders in academic life typically return to faculty responsibilities.

Articles about leaders retiring after an esteemed leadership career are plentiful as are articles about turnover in non-leadership employees. Studies of leadership and organizational failure are also available. However, research on downward academic transitions is virtually nonexistent. The articles that do exist on this topic tend to be first person accounts offered in blogs or on professional websites rather than being empirical in nature.

This article presents the personal experience of three individuals, the authors of this article, all of whom have educational backgrounds in psychology. All three were psychologist-leaders who transitioned out of leadership and returned to the same organization in a faculty line position. Following these examples, we explore this phenomenon from personal and managerial perspectives. We examine how faulty heuristics complicate perceptions of the decision to rejoin faculty and potentially compromise the success of the decision. We conclude the article with a discussion of how individuals experiencing this type of transition can survive and thrive in their new roles, and why they should.

## The Case Studies

### Example 1: Choosing Family Over Stress

CMF began her leadership role as an Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences during her 4th year of an academic career at a mid-sized, technology-focused university. Prior to entering administration, she held tenure-track positions at three different universities. At each institution, she served in faculty leadership roles, including Faculty Senate President, Chair of the Curriculum Committee, Undergraduate Program Coordinator and immediately before entering formal administration, Associate Department Chair. Shortly after becoming Associate Dean, CMF was asked to enter the Provost's office as an Assistant Provost focusing on graduate studies and research. Over the course of her eight years in higher education leadership, CMF ascended to higher and more complex roles such as Associate Provost, Interim Provost, Assistant to the President, and Senior Executive VP for Academics and Research.

Because her leadership roles were so varied, she had a broad impact on campus life. She served as the senior leader in charge of research, government relations, strategic planning, corporate relations, and assessment, among other duties. In her role, CMF had notable successes including establishing a Women's Center on one campus, leading the efforts to rewrite the University's strategic plan and mission, helping to develop new degree programs, and successfully bringing significant research contracts to the University. However, her investment came at some personal cost. As in many leadership roles, she was "on" 24/7, 365 days a year, traveled intensively, and experienced significant stress even during successful times.

Toward the end of the eight years, CMF experienced adverse professional and personal changes. A challenging personal life finally led to a separation and subsequent divorce, affecting her young son significantly. Personal rivalries at work made her professional position much more difficult and much less enjoyable. In addition, CMF also began to foresee potential difficulties arising for a divorced woman serving in a conservative and predominantly male organization. At the same time, her ideas for university

development began to diverge from other cabinet-level executives, and individuals outside the formal leadership structure were arbitrarily influencing high-level decision making at the university.

CMF admits that she may have been slow to respond to the warning signs that could signal that a change might be needed. Her history of professional success, combined with her optimistic (perhaps naïve) personal style, fueled her belief in her own administrative competence. However, while on a weekend trip prior to a Board of Trustees meeting, CMF took the time to assess her life, developed some profound insights about her declining life satisfaction, and opened herself to the possibility of pursuing new professional goals. She envisioned a dramatic leadership struggle ahead should she remain in her position and she realized that her child was more important than the stress that would create in her life. CMF contacted human resources, expressed her desire to resign and return to faculty, and within a few days transitioned from her leadership position and into a six-month sabbatical to prepare for a new-old faculty role.

### **Example 2: A Smooth and Tranquil Transition**

AYW's first leadership role was as Associate Chair of the Department of Psychology, which he assumed after working in a faculty line for 11 years at a regional comprehensive university. His primary responsibilities in the Associate Chair role included overseeing the undergraduate curriculum, course scheduling, and managing student complaints that worked their way up to the Chair's office. In addition, there were several departmental and university-level standing committees that required the active membership of the Associate Chair. As is common with most academic leadership roles, AYW enacted other duties as needed (these included signing authority when the Department Chair was traveling). He served in that role for 3 years.

Subsequently, the Dean of the Honors College asked AYW to become the Associate Dean of the Honors College, a role he assumed for five years. When the Dean decided to retire, he was selected as Dean of that organization following a national search. The primary responsibilities of the Dean were oversight over all academic, budget, co-curricular, and personnel issues related to the college. In addition, the Dean was responsible for college advancement and served on several standing university-level

committees as well as chairing many college-level committees. A typical week required the Dean's attendance at two evening receptions, including presidential events, recognition ceremonies, and/or fundraising opportunities. Despite the heavy workload, AYW found his deanship to be a gratifying and enriching experience.

By the tenth year as Dean he "took stock," looking back on the progress he had made with the help of a collegial and energetic Honors college staff. He concluded that the college had made great strides, which included the following impressive outcomes: dramatic increases in freshmen SAT scores, increasing numbers of Honors classes and interdisciplinary seminars, the development of four international service-learning programs, and a ten-fold increase in annual fund raising. At the conclusion of his 11-year tenure as the Dean, the Honors College had not only increased its reputation and stature on campus but had grown to an enrollment of about 2,000 students and 17 staff members. Several other institutional projects concluded at this time so the time seemed right from an organizational and personal perspective to seek new leadership for the Honors College.

AYW describes his the transition from leadership to faculty status as smooth and orderly. To make the transition successful for both the organization and AYW, he arranged meetings with important stakeholders one year in advance of his targeted transition date. These meetings included the Provost (the Dean was a direct report) and Honors staff members. Consequently, AYW had adequate time to prepare for his transition and all others were able to plan for a successful search for his replacement.

For AYW, the decision to transition back to faculty life served several happy functions. The first was the proud acknowledgement that although much had been accomplished under his leadership, the Honors College might benefit from the fresh ideas and energy that would emerge with a new leader. Another reason was his desire to return to his disciplinary roots in the professoriate. After all, it was the call of teaching and research that attracted him to academia in the first place. Finally, his time as a faculty member and academic leader allowed him to develop a deep institutional knowledge that would be beneficial to others in less formal capacities. In this regard, AYW currently mentors younger colleagues

and serves as an advisor to the Chair of the Psychology Department. He reports being happily and productively engaged in his department in his renewed life as a faculty member.

### **Example 3: Resilience under Fire**

JSH backed into administrative leadership early in her career. At her first institution of hire, a small women's liberal arts college, the department coordinator went on sabbatical at the end of JSH's first year. As is true of many higher education leaders, JSH accepted the job as a defensive posture ("better me than someone else...."). However, she quickly discovered that she enjoyed solving the puzzles entailed in managing academics and psychology programs. Her personnel responsibilities were small at the start with four colleagues but grew to ten by the end of her coordinator duties. After six years she became a division head, serving in that capacity for seven years before deciding a different size pond was in order.

At her second institution, a large regional comprehensive university, she was hired as a Head of the psychology department but re-designated after her arrival as a Director of a "school of psychology." The job entailed graduate and undergraduate programs as well as oversight of a clinic, burgeoning grants management, and endowed professorships. Reorganization fever drove administration to redefine and realign departments. JSH decided to pursue a higher-level administrative position and moved on to Institution 3, another smaller regional comprehensive university where she served as the dean of a college of arts and sciences for ten years. The university was relatively young and the opportunities for impact were abundant. Although the scope of the job was challenging with responsibilities for about 200 full-time faculty members and over twenty departments, she enjoyed learning about new disciplines, helping to establish new campus rituals, and supporting the mission of doing the noble work of public universities. She thrived under the challenge of making good departments great and especially enjoyed shaping successful faculty career plans. She had strong approval ratings from the faculty, enjoyed collaborative relationships across campus, lost none of the few grievances filed against her, and experienced no litigation during her deanship.

Although the details feel complicated and sometimes even a bit melodramatic, her return to faculty status was motivated by yet another bout of institutional reorganization. A new provost exercised her



privilege to reorganize (“a new broom sweeps clean”), including moving all existing deans out. In the case of JSH, the very large arts and science college she managed was distributed across three new college structures. JSH received one year’s administrative leave to retool for the classroom.

That year off was keenly appreciated, but not because of the need to get up to speed for the classroom. JSH always taught undergraduate or graduate classes in every administrative role she played and she maintained a vigorous scholarship program that included textbook writing. Consequently, there was little shock to the system in returning full time to work she loved so well. However, the fates were especially unkind that year because, in addition to the news that the provost wanted “to go in another direction,” her house burned down and she had to have a hip replaced. She joked about having a fire, getting fired, and become bionic as the “trifecta” of a stunningly tumultuous year. Building a new house, rehabbing a hip, and preparing for new courses filled a leave year that went quickly.

JSH had always intended to spend her twilight academic years in the classroom rather than administration because of the joy that students brought to her life. However, the abruptness of the provost’s decision took a toll and was particularly hard on morale for JSH and those who had been invested in the college’s operation. JSH struggled with the fact that she wouldn’t be able to keep the promises she had made to mentor the individuals she had persuaded to become new chairs. Because of those commitments, JSH concluded that she could not engage in typical face-saving public tactics that she was “volunteering” to depart, which placed an even greater strain on the relationship with the provost. However, she respected the provost’s right to assemble the team she needed and trusted. She also recognized that their chemistry would not have mixed well over the long haul. In retrospect, the provost made the right decision in building her own team by accelerating JSH’s plan to return to teaching.

After 30 years of administrative duties, JSH happily rejoined faculty status with colleagues who were generous and supportive, making the transition a relatively easy one. When requested to do so by her colleagues, she occasionally must put her dean hat back on to help deconstruct campus politics for the department. As predicted, she feels grateful for the more direct opportunity to help students develop and thrilled that she gets to go home regularly in the evening, which was certainly not the case in life of an

academic dean. She also does significant career mentoring of colleagues both on her own campus and elsewhere, who are attempting to take on higher administration responsibilities, including four “protégés” who have gone on to university presidencies.

### **Why do Good Leaders Transition out of Leadership?**

As our examples attest, competent leaders leave their roles for a number of reasons. Here we summarize the variables that seem to weigh most heavily in this important decision.

#### **Personal Costs**

Leadership roles are time consuming and stressful in the best of situations. Gmelch et al. (1999) examined stressors in academic deans and found that for both Australia and the United States, the number one stressor for deans was keeping up with administrative tasks. This stressor was followed by managing professional relationships with one’s supervisor and subordinates, and lack of personal time. Across our examples, leadership roles required being accessible around the clock, available to engage in frequent travel, and willing to forego vacations. CMF observed: “I had to be there when the boss was on vacation to help run things and I had to be there when the boss was there to help run things.” Administrators regularly tend to report to work early, enduring long workdays that often included school-related functions on evenings and weekends. When not involved in functions, administrators typically work at home late into the evening. In many respects, the intensity of their work is largely invisible to their constituents, since constituents can’t directly observe the long hours and personal sacrifices.

Because the jobs require a huge investment in time and energy, academic administrators are prime candidates for burnout, resulting in exhaustion, depersonalization, diminished enthusiasm, and reduced efficacy (Maslach, 2003). Leadership positions are 12-month contracts compared to typical 9-month faculty contracts. When faculty depart for a well-deserved summer break, administrators’ work often intensifies to complete year-end reports and faculty evaluations. The longest vacation AYW took during his eleven years as dean was for one week. A long tenure in leadership is a demanding role that often leads to fatigue at best, and burnout at worst.

Personal relationships can suffer when administrators commit so much time to the job. Although administrators' potential for burnout has escaped research attention to date, research literature examining other professional managers may be instructive. For example, dentist-managers often leave leadership positions due to high levels of loneliness, and stressors caused by high workload and uncertainty in their work contexts (Tuononen, Suominen, & Lammintakenan, 2016).

### **Constrained Working Contexts**

Zimmerer & Taylor (1989) studied why middle managers left organizations and found that managers reported that inability to have control and input over their work was the main cause of dissatisfaction. In academia, sudden issues and deadlines arise that are typically not under the leader's control (e.g., a new Board of Trustees mandate governing the use of student fees), yet require one's immediate and effectual attention. JSH used to marvel at the degree to which her plans for the day regularly had to be abandoned to address the *crisis du jour*.

Faculty roles involve significant autonomy, time for personal development, and a high level of individual creativity. Faculty are accustomed to those parameters associated with the academic freedom found in classroom and laboratories. In contrast, academic leadership often requires a selfless focus on managing, policy enforcement, and decision-making at the expense of individual development and creativity. Administrators have limited control over their schedules and constituents cannot observe the majority of what their administrators do during the workday. They also must learn the specialized languages and practices of businesses and boardrooms including: budget management, performance metrics, and strategic planning. The dramatic difference between the teaching and administrative climates is one reason many faculty cannot make the transition into leadership; faculty may try out the role but leave as soon as it is possible to do so because the strain and costs are simply too great.

### **Incompatible Values**

An academic leader's vision and values for the organization may not always cohere with the vision/values of important stakeholders. Leaders can develop new ideas and interests that don't jibe with those whom they are intending to lead. For example, a leader can attend a workshop about a potentially

transformative means of delivering a program, but discover that they can't generate excitement for new directions among faculty who are comfortable with the status quo. The disconnection generates disappointment and frustration for all concerned.

However, the larger challenge for administrative longevity typically occurs when a leader's values diverge from those higher in the hierarchy (e.g., supervisors, board members, upper administration). Although vision and drive shown by leaders may earn rave reviews at one point in the leader's career, leadership changes at the very top can realign the organization's current direction and values. Stripling (2011) points out that the estimated length of stay of a college president is between 8 and 10 years. With every new president (or other higher administrator) comes the risk that an educational leader's time may be limited. Assuming a leadership role entails some risk. One's values, which at one point may have been a good fit in the university's evolution, no longer work under a new regime; leaders may simply, and sometimes suddenly, find their ideas out of sync with their superiors. Maslach (2003) suggested that when values are incompatible, work satisfaction declines precipitously.

In these circumstances, a leader must decide whether it will be possible to adapt and embrace the new values. Options include trying to align their values with the new administration (staying put), seeking a position elsewhere that aligns better with the leader's vision and values (stepping away), or transitioning into a different role in the organization (stepping down). JSH stepped away from her first academic home related to a crisis of values. She ultimately recognized that the institutional values were not well suited to her own and sought a new environment that would be a better fit. CMF stepped down from her leadership responsibilities, preserving her allegiance to the institution but returning to a faculty role that would entail less cost and risk. Karpacz (2017) studied senior, female leaders who stepped down from leadership, reporting that frustration with the organization was one of four key factors that led to their decision. (For women, the other three factors were family priorities, a lack of work-life balance and high levels of stress.)

Of course, the choice to leave the role may not be under the leader's control. Unhappy constituents can call for a vote of no confidence and request removal of the leader. New brooms can

sweep clean to ensure a management team that aligns with new institutional values and visions. Removal through either of these methods may inevitably generate scar tissue and ill feelings, thereby influencing the quality of the transition.

### **Loneliness**

Folk wisdom suggests, “It’s lonely at the top” (Wright, 2013). Although there is substantial literature on the social isolation of principals, virtually no attention has been directed toward the loneliness of the experience of those who lead in higher education, but the isolating effects of assuming leadership are apparent, whether one rises from the ranks or is transplanted from another institution.

When a faculty member ascends to new responsibilities in the same institution, it can strain prior relationships. Mild teasing about “joining the dark side” is predictable. More insidious is the shifting perception that assumes a more powerful role is likely to generate fundamental unattractive changes in the leader’s personality and values. At best, the former friends of the elevated peer may question the objectivity of their judgments, worried that cronyism might influence their decisions. At worst, the leader may be characterized as having “sold out” or lost sight of what it is like to be a faculty member. What former colleagues may fail to see is the need for an administrator to look across larger units to make fair and reasonable decisions. To reinforce impartiality, administrators often feel the need to distance themselves from former friends and colleagues, thus contributing to personal and professional loneliness.

Beginning leadership responsibilities in a new environment is also socially challenging. The new administrator does not have former peers in a social network, but must start building social life afresh. Friendships with constituents is problematic because these can be perceived as promoting favoritism. Friendships with supervisors is similarly challenging because supervisors will want to avoid being perceived as having favorites as well. Friendships with administrators at the same level are problematic because the leader may be competing with those individuals for institutional resources.

Because the leader’s social choices come under such scrutiny (*“Who is the dean eating lunch with? What could that mean for support for our new faculty line?”*), many educational leaders recognize they must nurture friendships outside academic as the safest strategy to meet their social needs. However,

due to the time-intensive nature of the job, there may be insufficient time or energy left after work to pursue those relationships. Alternatively, the work of academic administration is so people-intensive that academic leaders may simply socially retract during their down time to recover and reenergize for the next day's schedule.

### **Professional Closure**

Sometimes leaders realize that they are “done.” Leaders achieved what they set out to achieve and moved the organization forward in a positive way. They are satisfied with what has been accomplished and at the same time are ready for a new and/or different challenge, or are less motivated to continue the work in the future. This realization focuses on personal choice and desire for a change. This result is best exemplified by AYW's decision to transition back to the faculty.

Stepping away from leadership in this sense can also mean that a leader recognizes that it may be in the organization's future interest to develop new talent in leadership and that the best course of action is to become a constructive force in that direction, rather than remain and perhaps become resistant to change and new ideas. Institutions tend to be more robust survivors than the individuals who participate in them. All authors note with some humility that their respective institutions don't appear to be suffering without their formal leadership contributions.

### **The Heuristic View from Outside**

When told that AYW was stepping down as Dean, many acquaintances asked him “Why? What happened?” In the U.S., the norm is for professionals to work their way up the hierarchy and reach the pinnacle of a career. To some extent, research reinforces the view that leadership is not easily given up. Seniority in managers is a key component of organizational commitment and those with higher commitment are less likely to leave (DeConinck & Bachmann, 1994). Once an individual attains a leadership role, giving it up--regardless of the reasons for transitioning downward--is rare. Therefore, observers often struggle to make sense of the news of the impending departure. The external world can and often does construe this outcome negatively and may assume it signifies failure.

As psychologists, we recognize that people are highly motivated to understand human behavior. We desire closure on events that are puzzling and that generate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). It is understandable that observers would want to understand why individuals would back away from positions of power and the attendant rewards of those positions. Often this desire to know leads to the use of heuristics that may distort the real motivations that prompted the leader's change in professional direction.

The Dunning-Kruger Effect suggests that observers don't know what they don't know (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). In this case, observers will not be privy to the complex factors that went into a decision, nor are many people likely to want to endure an explanation that details every nuance. In addition, where some conflict attends the decision, it is in no one's best interest for the constituents to roll out the details for public consumption. This circumstance lends itself to feelings of ambiguity that observers will settle as best they can with their cognitive tools, including the flawed heuristics and defense mechanisms that are available to them.

Correspondence bias encourages people to assign blame to the actor rather than entertain the external variables that contribute to any given action (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). This tendency derives from being incompletely informed, being unaware of the circumstances, and having no feedback to correct misperceptions. Psychologists are not immune from this cognitive error. Therefore, observers reason that a leader who steps down must have done something wrong or be at fault in some way. Observers are especially likely to invoke this attribution when a leader steps out of management, but continues to stay in the organization. They feel reinforced in the judgment that something must be wrong, since the leader can't find a new leadership position elsewhere.

Further reinforcing the flawed leader explanation is application of the just world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980), in which individuals justify that "bad things happen to bad people." If observers perceive stepping down as an undesirable outcome, then they may also presume something big and bad must have happened for this outcome to have transpired.

Contributing to conclusions that failed leadership explains the decision to transition is the availability heuristic, which represents the tendency to rely on salient examples that easily come to mind when drawing conclusions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In the present case, observers may summon memories of prior mistakes the leader may have made to justify the decision. If the mistakes were relatively insignificant at the time, the observer may revise their meaning, amplifying their significance to explain why the leader stepped down.

Confirmation bias, the tendency to seek information that preserves what one already presumes (Nickerson, 1998), can be evident when institutional gossip ramps up to generate solutions to the mystery of why someone in power is stepping down. It becomes easy to find other examples that reinforce the conclusion that has already been drawn.

In a highly competitive environment or an environment experiencing significant challenges, a leader who steps away can be made an easy scapegoat. Hovland and Sears (1940) explored how economic factors encouraged those in power to blame others for their failures. Blaming the departing leader, especially if that leader is on leave to retool, can divert pressure from remaining administrators to explain an organization's failings. Current leadership escapes accountability for pressing problems if this strategy is successful.

Self-serving bias (Sedikides, et al., 1998) can also shape intuitions about the downward trajectory. A successful leader in a complex organization is bound to make at least a small percentage of constituents unhappy because the leader will not be able to satisfy everyone's needs. For the leader's detractors, the announcement of a new direction is a happy event, a vindication of sorts that supports their foregone conclusion that the leader wasn't fit for the job in the first place. In fairness, however, departing leaders' explanations can also provide evidence of self-serving bias. They are much more likely to focus on the shortcomings of the institution to explain their unhappiness rather than recognize their personal contributions to the situation.

Given the potential for a variety of negative consequences when a leader steps down, how can a leader survive what others might consider a downward transition? We have extracted some principles



from our collective experience to assist others who depart their leadership roles. We believe it is not only possible to make a successful transition, but to thrive in the faculty role, offering a type of fulfillment that higher education leadership roles can't provide.

### **How to Survive and Thrive in a New Role**

#### **Clarify the Parameters of the New Role**

Stepping back to faculty entails working through decisions about role, workload, and compensation. For example, reducing responsibilities should entail a smaller salary but the percentage might be negotiable depending on years of service. Individuals moving from a 12-month to a 9-month status should expect to make less money, but a step-down percentage is often determined in the contract that governed the role. For example, JSH's step-down percentage had been contractually upgraded to 85% based on strong performance early in her service. Although she realized a technically smaller paycheck on stepping down, by the time she factored in summers off, the hourly rate of pay was actually better than it had been in the dean's role.

Similarly, workload should be adjusted according to mutual decisions about the roles that will be played. Individuals with institutional history and wisdom can become ombudspersons in helping informal resolution of faculty problems. Other special assignments might reduce how many courses would be expected in returning to the classroom. As well, returning to full-time course delivery might be gradual to assist the departed leader to re-establish a vibrant research agenda as well as stimulating classes.

As a Dean, AYW cultivated extensive relationships across various campus offices. He not only possessed an 'institutional schema' of the functions carried out by different offices, but also the knowledge of the procedures and the "go to" person for each office. He recalls that when making his transition to the faculty, he arranged an initial meeting with the department chair. Much to his delight, the chair asked if AYW would be willing to serve as an advisor and assume special assignments that would be included in his faculty duties. As a result, in his first year as a transitioned faculty member AYW helped the department develop its alumni base and completed a report on the merits of an advisory board to the chair. AYW has also been asked to serve as a panelist for his university's Leadership Enhancement

Program that provides a series of workshops for faculty members interested in assuming leadership roles on campus.

Peaceful transitions strive to maintain the status of the person stepping down in “good standing.” In this fashion, the individual can contribute in a variety of ways from breadth of institutional experience that can help the institution achieve its goals. Otherwise, a valuable investment the institution has made in the former leader will go to waste. Where transitions are not so peaceful, transitioning leaders may benefit from consulting with an attorney to figure out the best position from which to negotiate “a lily pad,” a package of benefits that might include travel funding, administrative leave time, retention of office space, or other perks that appropriately reflects appreciation for services rendered.

### **Craft a Collaborative Announcement**

How supervisors announce the news of the change in plan will be critical to initiating a successful transition. Colleagues will scrutinize the announcement for clues about insight into the real motives for departure. An effective transition announcement needs to highlight the achievements of the leader and express gratitude for the time served. Tentative plans for how the responsibilities will be addressed (e.g, interim appointment, immediate job search) can provide reassurance to those who are worried about what happens next. Negotiating a news release that is carefully crafted can do a great deal to limit adverse attributions and reduce turmoil.

### **Let It Go**

In making the change, a leader must accept the fate that has transpired, let go of the past, and focus on the future. Ruminating about what you could have done differently to change the outcome is understandable, but it simply will reduce the energy you have for planning a new direction. No longer in leadership, it does not assist your transition to continue to gather information and gossip related to your former role. Nor is it productive to discuss or criticize your replacement’s behavior and how you might have done things differently. Put yourself back in your own driver’s seat and move on.

CMF provides a personal anecdote to illustrate this principle. She observed, “For a couple weeks after I stepped down, I worried about what would happen after I left, especially to the people who worked

for me and the structure I had created. I worried about what people thought of me, and wondered if the things I had done would have a lasting positive effect on the institution. Then one beautiful, late spring morning, I was out on a walk. It was 10am and I didn't have a meeting to attend, a trip to prepare for, or a crisis to deal with. At that moment it dawned on me that I felt free and I breathed that feeling in with a huge smile on my face. I realized then and there, I made the right choice.”

### **Assume a New Vantage Point**

Changing perspectives is crucial in transitioning away from formal leadership. First, recognize that you were originally chosen for a formal leadership role due to your personal characteristics and talents. Just because you are leaving the leadership role doesn't mean those qualities no longer exist in you. It does mean though that you will have to determine how to apply those qualities in a positive manner in your new role. Most likely you will be moving from a formal to informal leadership role. A certain percentage of your colleagues will continue to see you as a leader with experience and connections that can help your new unit. Look forward to applying your leadership skills in an open and transparent manner that is truly focused on the benefit of your unit and peers, and not in an ego-involved manner.

Realize the knowledge that you bring with you allows for a broader perspective and can lead to greater success. You occupy an unusual and interesting cognitive space in which you re-enter your unit with a 360-degree view. You know how the organization works at all levels because you have lived them. For example, when a peer fails to understand why a new initiative was met with resistance, you may be able to explain exactly why and diffuse any resulting negativity. You often know exactly who to call to request approval and how the request should be made. Other examples may be found when budget requests are denied. As a faculty member, AYW needed to calm down a colleague who took it personally that her budget request was turned down by a dean. Having administrative insight allowed him to explain that the reason for the denial was probably not due to the merits of the proposal, but due to the disadvantageous timing of submission at the end of the fiscal year when funding is tighter. Armed with this advice, the applicant was successful when the revised proposal was approved on resubmission at the start of the next budget cycle.

Perhaps institutional knowledge is best understood as a form of ‘practical wisdom,’ which is defined as “making good decisions—doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons” (Jeste, et al., 2019, p. 218). Within this framework, it is conceptualized as a set of skills for making wise decisions, displaying comprehensive knowledge about a topic, and demonstrating an intellect guided by moral virtues and social responsibility. The ability to exercise one’s practical wisdom is associated with better health and mental health outcomes as well as happiness and a sense of well-being (Jeste, et al., 2019). It is no surprise that we believe that shared practical wisdom is a winning outcome that not only benefits the organization, but also the personal development and successful adjustment of the transitioned faculty member. Indeed, our belief in the benefits of shared practical wisdom is one reason why we felt compelled to write this article.

### **Embrace New Horizons**

Moving to an individual contributor role often allows for more personal choice and creativity. Amabile (1997) found that creativity thrives when autonomy increases. CMF thought about how she wanted to restart her research career and decided to focus in an entirely new and (to her) exciting area. She was able to use her prior work in the field as a springboard to new applications and found it energizing and productive. JSH was able to ramp up consulting with other psychology departments by serving on academic program reviews where her knowledge of “how dean’s think” provided added value to her reviews. Outside of academia, experienced leaders who become individual contributors may find they more frequently experience creative moments, and as a result can more successfully generate and test new ideas or products.

Other research has shown that for middle-aged adults and seniors creative activity is associated with life satisfaction and health (Adams-Price, Nadorff, Morse, Davis, & Stearns, 2017). Related to Erikson’s concept of ‘generativity,’ creative activity is also viewed as important because it offers adults a sense of productivity as well as a means of resisting the perceived threat toward their professional identity when undergoing a career change (De Medeiros, 2009; Erikson & Erikson, 1997).

The transitioned faculty member now has the time, wisdom, and opportunity to engage in creative scholarly activity without the pressure that younger faculty members experience. Formal campus leaders (chairs and above) are typically chosen from the ranks of senior faculty members who have already attained tenure largely on the basis of their research productivity. When an academic leader transitions back to a faculty role, there is more freedom to engage in scholarly ideas because they are inherently interesting rather than driven by the publish-or-perish dilemma.

Some transitioned faculty members may choose to forego establishing a new active research program. With the endorsement of supervisors, they can still contribute to the scholarly life of the department by serving on dissertation committees, supporting undergraduate research, and providing leadership on projects that result in well-researched, useful technical reports.

### **Restore Work-Life Balance**

As a result of your move you should be able to enjoy more balance in your life. Although work-life balance is often vaunted as important to worker satisfaction, leaders don't often live that principle. In stepping away from leadership, you have the opportunity to redevelop both the professional and personal areas of your life. In some ways, this can be viewed as the most important result of a transition. You are given a chance to renew, restart, and redo. You now have the time to take on new and challenging projects or to revisit earlier avocations with greater depth. While this may be daunting, it can also be incredibly fulfilling both on a personal and professional level.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

The authors have tried to present their lived experiences in an open and honest manner. However, while it is hoped that this article may generate discussion on leadership transitions, it is not intended to be representative of the experience of all leaders. The case studies presented are from a non-representative set of leaders in the southeastern United States. Their experiences, especially those based on gender and position held, may not be generalizable to other areas of the United States or other countries.

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