

Leadership in Higher Education and the Second Half of Life

By: Roxanne Mills, 2006

In institutions of higher education, top administrators, deans, department heads, etc. have usually reached the second half of their life. This article suggests that this is a transitional period in an individual's life and can have an impact on their leadership style.

One obvious implication of having leaders in their second half of life is that of health. It is inevitable that most individuals will suffer from health issues as they get older. The article mentions a man serving as a department chair at a university suffering a heart attack from the stress of the job. It can be assumed that as we age, our bodies do not "bounce back" like they did in our younger years.

But what exactly makes the job so stressful? The demanding tasks of an education leader can certainly hand out a fair amount of stressors, but this article argues that the simple milestone of entering the second half of life can be enough to stress out an individual.

In the first half of life individuals are typically concerned with education, relationships, work, family, and children. It is not until the second half of life where someone will seriously start to find meaning in one's life. Life's focus thus starts to become inward.

One reason why this may become stressful has to do with climbing the ladder of success. Someone is probably sitting as the leader of an adult education program as a means to climb the ladder of success. In the second half of life, if you reach the top of that ladder, find that what's at the top is not what you expected, then there is an enormous amount of pressure to find success somewhere in order to make up for lost time. The article mentions that people finding themselves in this predicament need to change focus: instead of working for success, start working for significance.

So how does one change focus? First, an individual needs to look towards inner direction rather than outside opinions. With years of experience under their belt, it is time for that individual to start focusing on individual goals that coincide with their organization's goals. Concentrate on making a significant impact in the field.

The article also suggests that these individuals transform themselves into servant leaders. Servant leaders put others ahead of their own agenda, possess the confidence to serve, initiates service to others, is not position conscious, and serves out love.

Those leaders who shift their focus to significance should also stress the values of followers, involve followers in deciding how to achieve any vision you or they may have, support followers in achieving the vision through feedback and coaching, and publicly recognize the efforts of followers and reward their successes. These kinds of leaders will be more effective mentors.