students, creating knowledge, and serving society demand all the intellect, skill, and commitment that academic leaders can muster. This book can help. Read it thoughtfully, yet playfully. Engage the ideas. Argue with them. Test them against your experiences. Try them out at work. As reward for your efforts, you will find that you expand your thinking, strengthen your resolve, clarify your purpose, and deepen your commitment and capacity to achieve your full potential as an academic leader.

Note
1. Readers can trace the evolution in our thinking about leadership effectiveness by exploring our other work, such as Bolman and Deal (1984, 2006, 2008a and b, 2010), and Gallos (1991, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2008c).

Nancy Turner was delighted to participate in a summer institute for new college presidents. The timing was perfect. She had just begun her term as president of North Valley Community College. She was optimistic but not naive, and she was eager for input. Nancy knew she faced big challenges. North Valley was respected in its region and in the community college world—strong and varied vocational programs and a solid record of sending students to four-year institutions. “A firm foundation gives me room to build,” Nancy reassured herself on accepting the presidency. But she also knew there were many clouds on the horizon.

North Valley had suffered budget cuts in recent years due to the economic downturn and to declining state appropriations. Faculty and staff had seen no raises in two of the prior three years, and morale on campus bordered on dismal. North Valley’s chief academic officer and dean of instruction, Bill Hartley, was widely unpopular on campus, partly because he had been the point person in the push by Nancy’s predecessor to increase teaching loads in response to budget shortfalls. Nancy knew she needed a strong partnership with the chief academic officer to get things rolling in the right direction. She was leery, however, of aligning herself too quickly or closely with a controversial campus figure.

“Take it slow” was the advice of Nancy’s mentor and former boss. The advice resonated with Nancy’s own style. Plus, she wanted more time to get to know Bill. His close-to-the-chest style
seemed unusually cool, and Nancy wondered how much was due to Bill’s weariness after years of battling campus opposition and how much was due to his disappointment that she, not he, had been selected as president.

“Well, the board chose me,” mused Nancy with some measure of satisfaction. “At least, most of them did.” Nancy had to admit that the board’s split vote still troubled her.

“Forget about it,” her board chair advised. “Those people were making a statement in support of our faculty, not voting against you. A few well-connected faculty got to their friends on the board and tried to hold up the hiring process until next year’s state appropriations were announced. And that gang has a history of disagreeing with the rest of the board anyway. We just vote them down and get on with our work,” he added with a smile. “Trust me. We’re confident that you’re the one to lead this campus out of its malaise.” Nancy wanted to believe him.

Only weeks after moving into her new office, Nancy found herself sitting around a table, discussing her situation with five other new presidents at the summer institute. She laid out her situation as objectively as she could, then asked, “If you were me, where would you start? How can I get this presidency off on the right foot?” Her colleagues jumped in with enthusiasm, as Nancy expected. She was surprised, however, that everyone gave her different advice.

“Get a vision and fast! You’re the captain of the ship, and you better know where you’re steering it. Rally the campus around a sense of direction,” suggested the first president.

“I disagree,” said the second. “You don’t want a one-woman show. You want a strategic planning process that involves the campus in setting priorities. Without that, no one has a basis for decision making. And involving folks in a campuswide activity is good for morale.”

“Maybe,” began the third, “but you know what Jim Collins says in Good to Great [2001]: First you have to have the right people on the bus. Nancy, you need a team that you can count on. Fire that chief academic officer, and get people who can build programs without taking it out of faculty hides. Go it alone, and you’ll collapse from trying to carry the whole campus on your shoulders.”

“Interesting,” said the fourth, “that no one suggested what I see as job number one: start with the faculty and work on morale and communications. Get out there. Hold faculty dialogue meetings. Get communications lines open and functioning. Tell everyone your picture of the college. Listen to theirs. Let them ask questions. Ask questions yourself. Good working relationships with the faculty are the key to a successful presidency.”

“Nope,” said a fifth emphatically. “Start with your board. If they’re not with you, you can’t go anywhere.”

Lively debate ensued as the group explored what Nancy should do. Each president provided additional examples and information to buttress his or her perspective. They referenced Barack Obama and Jack Welch, while offering quotes from best-selling leadership books and gurus. Nancy was impressed by her colleagues’ intelligence and gratified by all the input. But the discussion never arrived at the convergent picture she had hoped for. The diversity of views and variety of suggestions raised a question about whether there was anything else that she and her colleagues had missed. Five experienced academic leaders offered five different leadership paths, each convinced he or she was right. Nancy was intrigued by issues she hadn’t thought about. She was clearer about her options—she could choose among multiple roads going forward, each with its own pluses and minuses. But she felt little closer to answering her original question: “Where do I begin?”

All the counsel seemed to produce more uncertainty than clarity. “I still don’t know where I’m going,” laughed Nancy. “But I’m afraid that it’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

Nancy’s situation illustrates an important truth and theme in this book. Sensemaking is the difficult art at the heart of academic
leadership. We'd all like instant clarity about the complexities that we face and a clean slate to begin our academic leadership, but we are rarely that fortunate. Academic leaders bring their own ways of studying and interpreting what they see. They step midstream into institutions that have evolved distinctive histories, cultures, and traditions. Ideas about how to lead are based on implicit and often deeply buried belief systems about what’s important and how things work. Those beliefs vary, as we see in the different scenarios offered to Nancy. A key challenge for Nancy and any academic leader is how to make sense of complex circumstances, recognize available choices, choose the best path forward, and convey all that to others in a compelling manner. Whether we call this executive wisdom, sound judgment, reflective practice (Schön, 1983), or learning from experience, the lesson is clear. Effectiveness requires untangling the conundrums of the academy and the realities of your current situation, and then translating both into sensible choices and actions for self and others. Like all leaders, Nancy needs to know if she is seeing the right picture or if she has tuned in to the wrong channel. Knowing this is not always as easy and straightforward as one would wish.

Cluelessness is a perennial risk, even for very smart people. Sometimes, the information that leaders need is hard to get. Other times, they ignore or misinterpret data right before their eyes. A look at the basics of sensemaking offers insights into why that is so.1

Sensemaking involves three basic steps: notice something, decide what to make of it, and determine what to do about it. Humans are pretty good at all three, but we do them so automatically that we tend to overlook three important—and limiting—features of the process.

1. Sensemaking is incomplete and personal. Humans can attend to only a portion of the information and experiences available to them. Individuals’ values, education, past experience, cognitive capacities, physical abilities, and developmental limitations influence what they see. Leaders register some things, ignore others, and draw conclusions—and these steps occur quickly and often tacitly. For that reason, the everyday theories that higher education administrators construct feel so obvious and real to them that they are understood more as Truth and the way the world really is than as the individual creations and interpretations that they are. The five college presidents advising Nancy are cases in point. The tacit nature of the human sensemaking process can blind academic leaders to available alternatives and to gaps and biases in their framing (Argyris, 1982). It also leaves them feeling little incentive to question their interpretations or retrace any of their steps from data selection through action.

2. Sensemaking is interpretive. When thrown into life’s ongoing stream of experiences, people create explanations of what things mean—and often assume that others see things the same way or are wrong if they don’t. Each of the presidents advising Nancy offered different advice, and each felt confident that his or her perspective was right.

3. Sensemaking is action oriented. People’s personal interpretations contain implicit prescriptions for how they and others should respond. If you conclude, for example, that your unit’s budget problems result from overspending, then you’ll probably cut expenses. If you see the problem as inadequate allocations from central administration, then you might lobby for more. If you bemoan inattention to revenue generation, you’ll turn to new program development. If it’s embezzlement, a call to the campus police is in order. Think about Nancy Turner. If she accepts that strong support from faculty is key to her success, then building and sustaining those relationships is vital. If she concludes that the campus expects her to lead off with a compelling vision, she’ll get to work on the big picture. You can see the ease and the potential complications in all this for academic leaders. They’re off and running before they’re even sure what’s most important and where they should really be heading.
Sensemaking is a personal search for meaning, governed by tacit criteria of plausibility and satisficing (March & Simon, 1958) rather than accuracy. “We carve out order by leaving the disorderly parts out,” concludes eminent psychologist William James (Richardson, 2006, p. 5). Human nature is such that a “good enough” explanation of the situation will stop our search for other alternatives, even early in the hunt. We need not find the truth or the best of all possible solutions. We just want something that’s good enough by our tacit standards to let us move forward and get things done. And we’re rarely aware that this is what we are doing.

Jerome Groopman, a Harvard Medical School professor, studied how doctors think (Groopman, 2000, 2007). His work reminds us how easily and naturally humans satisfice even in life-and-death situations. It also illustrates the costs. Multiple studies of autopsies, for example, find that about 15 percent of all diagnoses are wrong, but usually not because of gaps in medical expertise (Groopman, 2007). More often, errors result from flawed sensemaking: ignoring information and test results that contradict whatever notion the doctor has already settled on.

What’s at stake for academic leaders is illustrated in a story from Groopman’s work (2007). He tells about a patient he calls Ann Dodge. At age twenty, Ann developed a serious eating disorder—every meal produced pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Over time, she saw some thirty doctors in a variety of specialties, and there was general agreement. Ann had a psychiatric condition, anorexia nervosa with bulimia. The problem was in her mind, the doctors concluded, but still very dangerous and potentially deadly. Doctors prescribed a series of treatments, including diet, drugs, and talk therapy. Her doctor told her to consume 3,000 calories a day, mostly in easily digested carbohydrates like pasta. Over fifteen years, she kept getting worse. In 2004, Ann was hospitalized four times in a mental health facility in hopes that close supervision of her food intake might enable her to gain weight. Nothing worked.

Finally, at her boyfriend’s insistence, Ann traveled to Boston to see a highly recommended gastroenterologist, Dr. Myron Falchuk. Ann was reluctant, and her primary care doctor advised that the trip was unnecessary since her problem was so well understood. But Ann went anyway. Falchuk had reviewed Ann’s records and knew what all the doctors had concluded. But he put the information aside—literally pushing the tall stack of folders and reports to the far side on his desk—and asked Ann to tell him her whole story again. As she did, Falchuk listened with a fresh mind and felt the story didn’t quite add up. Something was missing from the picture. In particular, he wondered why Ann wasn’t gaining weight if, as she insisted, she really was consuming as much as 3,000 calories a day. Well, he wondered, what if she couldn’t digest what she was eating? He did more tests, and eventually concluded that Ann suffered from celiac disease—an intolerance of the gluten commonly found in grains like wheat, rye, and barley. Ann Dodge was being poisoned by the pasta diet her physicians had prescribed to save her. As soon as she shifted to a gluten-free diet, she began to gain weight. In Ann’s view, Dr. Falchuk was a miracle worker. From our perspective, Dr. Falchuk illustrates the power and importance of reframing in helping us transcend the limits in our automatic sensemaking.

Here’s the point. When a doctor encounters a new patient, he or she tries to frame the patient by matching symptoms and selected pieces of information to patterns that the doctor has learned through experience and training. The process is quick and automatic: it begins with the first look at the patient when the physician enters the examining room. Doctors frame patients all the time.

“I’m sending you a case of diabetes and renal failure,” or “I have a drug addict here in the ER with fever and a cough from pneumonia.” Often a doctor chooses the correct frame and all the clinical data fit neatly within it.
But a self-aware physician knows that accepting the frame as a given can be a serious error. (Groopman, 2007, p. 22)

Expert clinicians can often determine what’s going on with a patient in twenty seconds. It’s simple pattern recognition, honed by training and experience. But sometimes they get it wrong. One source of error is anchoring: doctors can lock on to the first answer that seems right. “Your mind plays tricks on you,” says Groopman, “because you see only the landmarks you expect to see and neglect those that should tell you that in fact you’re still at sea” (2007, p. 65). Another source of distortion is a doctor’s own needs and feelings. Operating under time pressures and wanting to be helpful, physicians want to arrive at a diagnosis and prescription as quickly as possible. They feel competent and successful when they do. The same is true for academic administrators. Look at how readily Nancy Turner’s colleagues offered her advice. They wanted to help. She expected nothing less.

Like physicians, daily life for academic leaders presents them with a continuous stream of complex and ambiguous stimuli. Like their medical counterparts, higher education professionals live in a world of time pressures, work overload, and high expectations. To make sense of diverse forms and sources of information, higher education administrators do what doctors do. They frame each situation by matching it with a familiar pattern. That means academic leaders depend on the completeness of the information they gather, on the depth and accuracy of their frames, and on their ability to appropriately apply those frames to make accurate sense of the current situation. Whether academic leaders realize it or not, they always have choices about how to frame and interpret their world—and their choices are fateful. If, for example, Nancy Turner focuses her energies on recruiting a new chief academic officer while faculty morale continues to plummet—and news of the growing dissatisfaction bombards sympathetic board members—she may find herself in a deep hole before she can benefit from a stronger top leadership team.

A central mistake for leaders in any context is to lock into limited and flawed views of their world. We see reframing—the conceptual core of the book—as an antidote. Reframing is the deliberate process of looking at a situation carefully and from multiple perspectives, choosing to be more mindful about the sensemaking process by examining alternative views and explanations. Nancy’s colleagues each framed her situation differently, and each got at a vital piece of a larger puzzle. Each bit of advice expressed the personal frame, the mental map, of its maker—and that is the beauty and utility in strategies that seek feedback from diverse others. Each colleague stretched Nancy’s original views of her campus and of her leadership options. Together they offered Nancy a larger understanding of her challenges than any one alone might have. In the language of this book, they helped Nancy to reframe.

Research has shown that leaders often miss significant elements in decoding the situations and opportunities that they face (Bolman & Deal, 2008b; Weick, 1995). They will nonetheless do the best they can with what they have. The risk is that they’ll do what Ann Dodge’s early doctors did—focus on selected cues and fit what they see into a familiar pattern, even if it isn’t quite right. Like Ann’s doctors, they may insist that their answer is correct and that there’s no need for further input or investigation—even if the diagnosis leads to options that don’t work. In those cases, they will often conclude that the problem rests in the behavior of others, just as Ann Dodge’s doctors blamed her for not following their advice rather than asking if their advice was flawed. Academic administrators may do no physical harm when they frame a situation incorrectly, but they can still damage their credibility, their careers, and their institutions. We’re all in trouble when our sensemaking fails us.
Learning for Effective Action

From the outside, it may seem that effective leaders have an uncanny ability to read situations quickly. Many do, but they weren’t born that way. They acquired their capacity from practice and experience. Effective leaders have learned powerful thought processes that enable them to register what is going on, reflect on it, assemble it quickly into a conscious pattern, and see the big picture. What Malcolm Gladwell (2005) calls the blink phenomenon is a learned form of rapid cognition. There is no shortcut to developing this kind of quick judgment—it takes effort, time, practice, and feedback.

Academic leaders can develop their skills in reframing—train themselves to see their role, work, and institution more broadly and from different perspectives. The images of academic leadership developed in this book are a good place to start. By learning how to think and act in such diverse roles as institutional architect, politician, servant, coach, prophet, artist, and diplomat, you can expand your mental maps and cognitive frameworks. The images build on more than a century of theorizing about organizations and about human behavior in them, and capture much of what we know about organizations as rational systems, human enterprises, political arenas, and theaters of worklife (Bolman & Deal, 2008b).

Paradoxically, learning to make deep, accurate, and quick situational diagnoses requires slowing down. When you are feeling overwhelmed by everything coming at you, slowing down is counterintuitive and hard to do. But it is vital. The next time that happens, stop and ask yourself some questions. What’s happening here structurally—how do institutional rules, roles, and policies contribute? What are the people issues at play? What are the political dynamics, and who are the key constituents to consider and reach? What’s the meaning of this situation and of the options to me and to significant others? With practice, the process of reframing takes on the characteristics of any well-learned skill: quick, automatic, largely tacit. Such skills emerge from active learning and from practice, and we suggest five strategies to help the process along. None is rocket science, but all are easier to espouse than to do well and consistently.

To build your reframing skills …
1. Embrace the life of a reflective practitioner
2. Be aggressive in seeking growth opportunities
3. Actively and regularly solicit input from others
4. Anticipate and practice the future through data gathering and scenario building
5. Step outside your comfort zones and “break frame”

Embrace the Life of a Reflective Practitioner

A consistent research finding on professional effectiveness is that those who learn best, lead best. “Leadership and learning,” according to John F. Kennedy, “are indispensable to each other” (Kennedy, 1963). Publicly modeling engagement in learning as a daily professional imperative is a mode of leadership in and of itself (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). For higher education administrators, this suggests developing skills as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983). Leadership problems in higher education are complicated and rarely have one “right” answer. No one can anticipate and prepare for all that might arise on a college campus, but we can all get better at learning from our experiences. Skillful academic leadership depends on reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987): the capacity for leaders to think deeply before taking action, to reflect on how things are going as they act, and to continue learning throughout their professional careers. Over time, reflecting on
what we do also teaches us about our preferences, comfort zones, predictable responses, and trigger points. It’s easier to break habits when we know what they are.

**Be Aggressive in Seeking Growth Opportunities**

One of the best ways to learn is to take on new challenges and to be deliberate in determining how you will use these opportunities to build leadership capacities. Leadership is more a performing art than a science. Like artists, leaders can enhance their skills by regularly practicing their craft and honing their talents. A key quality among successful executives is a dogged tenacity in learning about themselves as leaders and managers and in seeking rich and varied opportunities for professional development (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). “Learning is not attained by chance,” reminds Abigail Adams (1780), “it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.” Don’t be afraid to experiment—stretching oneself broadens life and work skills. It can be risky: you may not learn as quickly as needed, and you can find yourself in over your head. Think carefully before you leap, and then keep an open mind. We learn from failure as well as success, and sometimes learning is even easier when the going is rough (Dotlich, Noel, & Walker, 2008).

**Actively and Regularly Solicit Input from Others**

We are all human and limited in our framing of the world around us. But that need not derail our leadership effectiveness. Constituents can teach us a lot about leading and about our organizations if we encourage them. They can offer alternative ways to view situations and help to identify our frame gaps and tendencies, as Nancy Turner’s story illustrates. Skillful leaders routinely seek information and advice from diverse others. They thank them for their honesty through nondefensive listening, and they acknowledge constituent contributions to successful outcomes. Such conversations will broaden our perspectives and diagnostic skills.

We learn about the preferences and tendencies of those around us and strengthen our capacities to work with them. The respect that we show others in seeking their participation and involvement will only deepen their commitment to our organization and to our leadership success.

**Anticipate and Practice the Future: Data Gathering and Scenario Building**

The future is hard to anticipate, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try. A powerful way for academic leaders to clarify their thinking and to test assumptions is to develop their own scenarios or stories about how specific leadership choices might play out over time. Scenario building has been used in industry for a long time—a way to “rehearse the future” and anticipate the impact of a host of forces. There’s plenty of advice out there on how to build scenarios if you want a more structured method (for example, de Geus, 1991; Schwartz, 1991; van der Heijden, 2005). Strategic planners approach the process as though a science. Or it can be a more informal and playful process of looking ahead (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008). Our goal is to encourage you to craft alternative stories for yourself about possible futures based on different choices and assumptions. Your organizational sagas may identify interesting plot twists, winners, and losers—things you’d want to know before facing them at work!

Take Nancy Turner’s case. Her colleagues suggested a number of different leadership paths. She might pick a few and construct alternative scenarios about each. She could envision one story, for example, where she started with creating a vision, and another where she started by getting the right team in place. Playing each out, she might find that one seems much more promising, that her two paths converge eventually, or even that she can see ways to do both at the same time. In any event, the process of projecting will help her to think and to communicate more clearly about possible futures for her college. She will be better able to predict and to
prepare for the twists and turns of different paths going forward. She will also lessen the risk of losing her way—or her footing—in the face of unanticipated challenges.

Step Outside Your Comfort Zone and Break Frame

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, the Hungarian-born, American biochemist who won the Nobel Prize in 1937, got it right when he noted, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought" (Good, 1965, p. 000). Reframing is a step on the road to important discoveries for academic leaders. Expanding one's frame of reference requires knowledge about alternative perspectives, appreciation for their potential contribution, and opportunities to practice looking at the same situation through multiple lenses. It also takes personal courage to break frame—to step out of one's comfort zone and away from the crowd in seeking new options, proposing new explanations, or testing alternative responses. Frame-breaking can move mountains, and at times leadership requires just that. Consider a news story about a home intrusion that flashed across the wires in the summer of 2007 (Klein, 2007).

Imagine that you are with a group of friends enjoying dinner on the patio of a home in Washington, D.C. As you are finishing the jumbo shrimp and enjoying an excellent bottle of French wine, an armed, hooded intruder suddenly appears and points a gun at the head of a young female guest. "Give me your money," he says, "or I'll start shooting." If you're at that table, what do you do? Quietly hand over your wallet? Look for some way to resist? Something else?

You could try to break frame. That is exactly what one of the guests did when this happened on that warm July evening. As everyone around her froze, Cristina "Cha Cha" Rowan spoke up. "We were just finishing dinner," she blurted out. "Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?"

The young intruder hesitated for a moment then took a sip of the Chateau Malescot St-Exupéry and said, "Damn, that's good wine."

The father of the young woman being held at gunpoint encouraged the intruder to finish the whole glass, and Rowan offered him the bottle. The robber, with his hood down now, took another sip and then a piece of food from the table. He put his gun away in the pocket of his sweatpants.

"I may have come to the wrong house," the intruder said before apologizing and backing away, carrying only the glass of wine.

"I was definitely expecting there would be some kind of casualty," said the young girl's father. "He was very aggressive at first. Then it miraculously just changed. His whole emotional tone turned."

In one stoke, Cha Cha Rowan broke frame, transforming the situation for herself and others from "We might all be killed" to "Let's offer our guest some wine." Pretty dramatic. Sure. But there's learning here for us all. Sometimes we just need a new perspective—and an opportunity to step back, take stock, and know that we have options. With calm and renewed confidence, we may find a route that gets us to a better place than we were before. An occasional skeptic has asked if the story is true. The news accounts say yes; but even if apocryphal, this tale still makes its point. When you see what everyone else sees but think differently about it, you're on the path to finding more interesting possibilities and becoming a better, more creative leader.

Summary

Sensemaking is at the heart of leadership, and it is particularly vital in the complex and confusing world of higher education. It is a personal, interpretive, action-oriented process involving three basic steps: noticing things, interpreting them, and deciding what
to do about them. Intuitively and automatically, we do this by trying to match current information and circumstances to learned patterns or frames. Often, that process works well enough—our take on the situation at hand tells us what to do, and we get results that are close enough to what we had hoped for. But sometimes, we get it wrong—we miss what's really happening, frame incorrectly, misinterpret our options, and go down a path to failure. When the world doesn’t quite make sense and our actions keep producing the wrong results, it is time to reframe: to examine the world from alternative perspectives, looking for new ways to understand and for new strategies to move ahead.

Notes

1. For a deeper discussion of the links between sensemaking and effective action, see Gallos (2008c).
2. Relevant Groopman articles published in the *New Yorker* and other popular press outlets can be found at http://www.jeromegroopman.com/.

Sarah didn’t want to be department chair, but she reluctantly agreed to take the job. None of her colleagues wanted it, and “someone had to do it.” Now she wondered if she had made a mistake. A few of the “dinosaurs”—all male and all more senior than Sarah—seemed resistant to the idea that a younger woman could be in any sense their “boss.” Sarah had tried to be cordial and supportive with everyone, but now she had to face the task she dreaded most: annual performance reviews. She stared glumly at one folder in particular: the performance materials for Professor George Hamden, a senior member of the department who held a distinguished endowed chair.

George was a charming curmudgeon—witty, articulate, opinionated, and quick to criticize anything he didn’t like. Loved by some, feared by others, he regularly undermined Sarah in department meetings with his entertaining but acerbic comments on almost any new idea or initiative that she brought to the floor. But what troubled her now was Hamden’s deteriorating performance. “The truth is,” Sarah thought to herself, “he’s been going downhill the last few years. His last publication was four years ago, and it wasn’t very good. He says he’s got great work in progress, but where’s the evidence? His teaching evaluations are down, and students are complaining that sometimes he doesn’t even show up to class.”
Sarah felt that the previous chair had ducked the problem—giving George a higher rating than his record deserved. She was tempted to follow suit and avoid a confrontation. But that felt like a compromise of her integrity. Sarah also remembered the dean's admonition that the school was not Lake Wobegon and that he didn't want chairs telling him that "all the professors are above average"—especially those whose records indicate that they are not.

Sarah's musing about her dilemma was interrupted by a knock on the door. George was here for his assessment conference. She had to do her best. We'll eavesdrop on an abridged version of the conversation between Sarah and George. As you read, note that the left column shows what they said to one another. The right column shows what Sarah tells us was happening in her mind as the meeting progressed.

### Sarah's Meeting with George

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was said:</th>
<th>Sarah's thoughts and feelings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S: George, thanks very much for coming. I'm glad we have this chance to talk.</td>
<td>Start friendly and positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: I hope I'll be glad as well.</td>
<td>I wish I thought that was possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: Of course. George, you know I have great respect for you, and I appreciate all you've done for the department over the years.</td>
<td>Play to his ego, and maybe we can have a productive meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: I'm delighted to hear that.</td>
<td>But I'm not optimistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: But it's because I have so much respect, I have to be honest. George, you must realize that your performance has slipped a bit in the last few years.</td>
<td>So far so good?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: (pauses, frowns, then smiles) What makes you feel qualified to make such a judgment?</td>
<td>Try to be as gentle as possible, but tell him the truth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: This isn't about my personal judgment. It's about the evidence. You don't have any recent publications. Your teaching . . .</td>
<td>He's trying to change the subject. Let's stick to the facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: (interrupting) If you look at my output over the years, I'm sure you can easily see that it compares favorably to anyone in the department. I should certainly hope you're not trying to compare my reputation with your own.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: (as calmly and amiably as possible) I'd never compare myself to you, George, and of course you have good reason to be proud of all you've done. But this isn't about your whole career; it's an annual assessment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: (acidly) Perhaps when you've matured a bit more, you'll realize that the only sensible way to look at scholarship is over the long term.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: (her voice rising) I didn't ask to be department chair, but I am. I'm just trying to do my job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: Yes, well, I suppose you're doing your job about as well as you can.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: (heatedly) George, it would help if you would open your mind and listen to someone else for a change! The evidence shows that . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G: There's no reason I should tolerate someone shouting and insulting me. I believe this meeting has already gone longer than productive. (He rises and leaves the office.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S: (watches George leave)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What a disaster! He was totally uncooperative, but he'll blame me and tell all his buddies how unfair I was.

I should do something, but I have no idea what.
Sarah’s intentions were honorable. She had a job to do. She expected it to be difficult, even painful, but it still turned out worse than she feared. She and George both left feeling that the meeting was an unpleasant failure. As the meeting spun out of control, Sarah struggled without success to control the conversation and her own feelings. At the end, she felt angry and helpless. Sarah and George each contributed to the disaster and each blamed the other. But neither felt responsible for the dismal denouement. Sarah left the meeting feeling worse about George and about herself; the same is likely true of George. More significant, neither party learned anything that might help them do better in conversations like this or with each other in the future.

Skilled Incompetence: Understanding Theories for Action

In Chapter Two, we argued that sensemaking and learning from experience are at the heart of leadership effectiveness. In looking at how Sarah prepared for and conducted her meeting with George, we can see an example of how everyday sensemaking can go awry and lead well-intentioned administrators into a quagmire while preventing them from having any idea how they could have avoided it. Sadly, scenes like this are all too common in the life of academic leaders. The Sarahs of the world dig their way into holes with unproductive strategies that they have come by honestly. The Georges help them shovel. There’s a perfect description for this kind of behavior: skilled incompetence, the use of automatic, learned behaviors to produce the opposite of what you intend (Argyris, 1986). Why does this happen? It is not because people set out to fail—almost no one does that. But in interactions with others, people often know what they intend without realizing that they’re not doing what they think they are. To complicate matters, they often have little or no understanding of the impact of their behaviors on others—and they have not developed habits of the mind to make such inquiry a regular part of their professional practice. As a result, they don’t see their responsibility for failed interactions, don’t see other options, and often don’t recognize the need to search for them. The same ineffective behaviors get repeated again and again. It happens to all of us—more than we realize. It is most common in situations that are the most challenging, and those are often the most important. The result is that academic administrators may handle routine items with aplomb but flounder with the things that really matter. Imagine the consequences of a steady diet of meetings that make things worse for all concerned.

Noted organizational theorists Chris Argyris and Donald Schön offer a framework for understanding this dynamic (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1996). They argue that individual behavior is controlled by personal “theories for action”: mental models that tacitly inform and guide our choices. Argyris and Schön distinguish between two kinds of personal theory. One is espoused theory: the accounts individuals provide whenever they try to describe their behavior (“Here’s what I did . . .”), explain the reason for it (“I did that because . . .”), or predict it (“What I’ll do in that meeting is . . .”). The other is their theory-in-use: the internal decision rules or implicit programs that guide how they behave. Others hear us talk about our espoused theories, but they see our theories-in-use. Problems ensue when the two kinds of theory don’t match.

Argyris and Schön studied thousands of professionals and managers, finding significant discrepancies between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use. In other words, individuals are often poor at describing and understanding the impact of their own actions. Would-be leaders typically saw themselves as more rational, open, concerned for others, and democratic than they were seen by their colleagues—or by the researchers. And such blindness was persistent because as a rule, people didn’t know they were blind and didn’t learn very well from their experience.
Argyris and Schön concluded that a major block to learning was a cycle of self-protective, interpersonal behavior that they labeled Model I. Their research showed that this program for action is ubiquitous: almost everyone uses it, even though few people realize that they do.

Model I Assumptions

Lurking in Model I is a set of core assumptions that the world is dangerous and so we better not let our guard down. These assumptions cause individuals to follow predictable steps in their attempt to protect themselves in their interactions with others. We can see this progression in the exchanges between Sarah and George.

1. **Assume that the problem is caused by the other person(s).** Sarah sees herself as earnest, selfless, and principled, simply trying to do a good job under difficult circumstances. She expects the meeting to be challenging despite her best efforts because George is routinely exasperating. Her implicit assumption is “George is the problem, and I have to be the solution.”

2. **Develop a private, unilateral diagnosis and solution—and then act on them.** Sarah sees at least two problems. The first is George’s work performance, which she hopes to discuss with him. The second is that she expects George to be defensive, unpleasant, and possibly belligerent in response to feedback on his performance. But it does not occur to Sarah to discuss that concern with George or to enlist his thoughts on how they can have a productive conversation about difficult issues. Sarah’s strategy instead is threefold: start positive; flatter George; and stay cool, rational, and factual. We have no direct evidence of what George was thinking in advance of the meeting, but it is likely he too was pessimistic. His consistent sarcasm and criticism convey little confidence in Sarah’s leadership. This means that they both expected failure and that both saw their pessimism as undiscussable.

3. **Get the others to change and be who you want them to be.** Use one or more of three basic strategies to accomplish the makeover: (1) facts, logic, and rational persuasion (argue the merits of your point of view); (2) indirect influence (ease in, ask leading questions, cajole or manipulate the other person); or (3) direct critique (tell the other person directly what he or she is doing wrong and how he or she should change). Sarah made a half-hearted and somewhat clumsy stab at easing into the conversation with George. The results were less than stellar. She then shifted to facts and logic, arguing the merits of her case. George riposted with disparagement of Sarah’s reputation and experience. It was all downhill from there.

4. **If the other person resists or becomes defensive, it confirms the initial diagnosis that the other is the cause of the problem.** George’s reactions and resistance to discussion of his performance proved to Sarah that her pessimism was justified and her diagnosis was spot on: George was as defensive and exasperating as expected. It is likely that Sarah’s raised voice and rising emotionality confirmed George’s perception that she was in over her head.

5. **Respond to resistance with some combination of intensifying pressure and protecting the other person or with rejection.** Sarah responded to George’s resistance by intensifying the pressure when she told him to open his mind and “listen to someone else for a change.” That led George to reject her before she could figure out what to do next—or to reject him first.

6. **If your efforts are less successful than hoped, it is the other person’s fault.** Sarah sees the meeting as a failure and regrets that she couldn’t do anything to make it go better. In her mind, it’s still George’s fault: he kept “trying to change the subject,” and he was “infuriating,” “arrogant,” and “totally uncooperative.” Sarah does not see how her behavior might have encouraged or allowed George to act in the very ways she feared he would.
Model II Assumptions

Model I survives because it enables us to get things done, but at a price that often includes wasted energy, strained relationships, and bad decisions. We continue to pay the price because we don't see our contributions to the bad results—and even if we do, we often don't know a better option. Argyris and Schön (1974) propose Model II as an alternative for more effective interactions. The basic precepts of Model II include:

1. **Emphasize common goals and mutual interests.** Even in a situation as difficult as Sarah's meeting with George, shared goals are possible. They both want to be effective, and neither will benefit from mutual destruction. Creating a shared agenda is a good starting point. Sarah could, for example, have said, "George, you've been in meetings like this before. What do you hope we can accomplish, and how should we proceed to make sure that happens?"

2. **Communicate openly, publicly test assumptions, and be willing to discuss the undiscussables.** Sarah dreads the meeting because she believes George will respond negatively to any questions about his performance. Her reasoning puts her in a hole from the beginning because she begins the meeting feeling anxious and fearful and ties herself in knots. She does not realize that she has built her approach to George around an effort to avoid what she suspects is unavoidable—an unpleasant battle with George. Model II suggests that Sarah openly test her assumption with George. She might say, for example, "George, let me tell you what I dread. If I raise questions about your work, you'll get angry and the meeting will go downhill. Should I be worried about that?" Such directness may seem surprising and risky. But Model II argues that Sarah has little to lose and much to gain. Even if George does not respond positively to her question, she is following a simple, but surprisingly useful precept: "When in doubt, try telling the truth." That would give George fuller information about her thinking and might enable them to talk about the elephant in the room. It is typically easier to address something that you can discuss than something you can't.

3. **Combine advocacy with inquiry.** Advocacy includes statements that communicate what an individual thinks, knows, wants, or feels. Inquiry seeks to learn what others think, know, want, or feel. Successful exchanges need a balance of both. Figure 3.1 presents a simple model of the relationship between advocacy and inquiry and a way to think about the meaning of our choices in using both.

Model II emphasizes high advocacy coupled with high inquiry. It asks academic leaders to express openly what they think and feel and to actively seek understanding of others' thoughts and feelings. The Sarah and George meeting consisted almost entirely of advocacy versus advocacy. Sarah tried to persuade George to look at evidence of his declining performance. George tried to persuade Sarah through his attacks that such a conversation was not a good idea. Neither showed any interest in learning about the other's point of view. Sarah never asks George for his perspectives and avoids or rejects almost everything he says. George does largely the same: the only question he asks ("What makes you feel qualified to make such a judgment?") is an attack rather than a request for information. Sarah saw George as dominating and arrogant without realizing that he could easily feel the same about her.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocacy</th>
<th>Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Passive, withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Dominant, persuasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative, engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning, manipulative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1 Advocacy and Inquiry.
Model II counsels Sarah to be open with George about her thoughts while testing her assumptions about him and the situation in order to learn about both. This is difficult. Openness carries risks, and it is hard to be effective when you are ambivalent, anxious, or frightened. It gets easier as you become more confident that you can cope with other people’s responses and that you have a range of workable options for doing so. How do you build both? Practice. Experiment in low-risk situations and test out new strategies. Write out and rehearse in advance new responses to situations that are likely to trigger nonproductive reactions. Role-play with a coach or a trusted colleague. Sarah’s ability to handle the difficult conversation with George depends on her confidence in herself and in her interpersonal skills. Beliefs can be self-fulfilling. If she tells herself that it is too dangerous to be open and that she does not know how to deal with difficult people, she will probably be right. A more optimistic prediction, however, can also be self-fulfilling.

Learning and Effective Action: Habits of Learning for Daily Practice

The larger lesson from Sarah’s meeting with George is not that a particular meeting didn’t go very well. We are all imperfect humans, and academic administrators work in a complex and challenging environment: it’s inevitable we’ll get things wrong. If we recognize and learn from those mistakes, things generally work out better over the long run. But Sarah didn’t learn, and the same is often true for other leaders. Why might that be so?

Learning about ourselves and our effectiveness can be a deceptively simple process: we act, assess the results, and decide what to do next. When the connection between act and outcome is easy to see, we learn quickly. Most of us learned to ride a bicycle—a set of skills too complex and subtle to be rendered in simple English—because the feedback was immediate, consistent, and clear. Some things worked, others didn’t—and we learned to distinguish which was which. Decades later, for example, one of the authors still has vivid memories of crashing painfully into a wooden barrier after rolling downhill before fully mastering the intricacies of the coaster brake. He only made that mistake once.

Learning is harder in interpersonal transactions because they are complex and fast-changing, feedback from others is elusive and ambiguous, and the same behaviors that work in one situation may fail in another. In her meeting with George, Sarah knew he wasn’t responding as she would have preferred, but she had to infer her impact from George’s comments, which were anything but direct. It was easier to conclude that George was annoying than to see how she might be fostering the very thing she hoped to avoid. George offered little to help her see otherwise.

Interpersonal learning is also difficult because egos and defenses get in the way. Chris Argyris reminds us that in threatening or emotionally awkward encounters we automatically seek to protect ourselves against vulnerability, embarrassment, or the appearance of incompetence (Argyris, 1990, 1994). The result is a recipe for anti-learning about something we need to understand: how our choices and actions fail us. In the complex world of higher education today, such blindness is potentially fatal. Leadership lies in the eyes of the beholder—and if academic leaders don’t know how their constituents see them, they’re in trouble. They need information to recognize when they are off course.

Four Habits of Learning for Leadership Effectiveness

1. Be proactive and persistent in seeking feedback from others.
2. Test assumptions and attributions.
3. Work on balancing advocacy and inquiry.
4. Learn about your theories-in-use.
as well as strategies for improving their ability to learn from experience. Both enable them to bring more confidence and authenticity to their leadership. We suggest four learning routines that academic leaders can build into daily practice.

**Be Proactive and Persistent in Seeking Feedback from Others**

We see our leadership from the inside. We know what we intend. Since we are all sometimes blind to the gap between our espoused theories and theories-in-use, feedback from those who know and work with us is the only way to determine whether our intentions match our actions. Few academic leaders, for example, seek such input from faculty—often because they fear what they would find out. The result is that many crash into walls of faculty mistrust or anger that they don’t see until too late. Two basic principles of interpersonal feedback can remedy that.

*Ask and You Shall Receive*

This sounds simple and obvious, but it’s surprisingly rare. Feedback mostly occurs in structured, high-stakes situations, like Sarah’s annual review meeting with George, or when debriefing major failures or special events. Experience makes people leery of offering feedback at other times unless they’re sure the recipient wants it. Asking is the easiest way to encourage them. It takes persistence and skill in framing the right questions. If you simply ask a colleague, “What did you think about my report/speech/...?,” the first responses will often amount to vague reassurance (“Seemed fine to me”) because comforting platitudes feel safe. But they don’t help. You’ll need to keep at it to get the kind of information necessary to expand your learning opportunities. Help others help you by following up with more specific probes:

“What do you think worked best?”

“What could I have done better?”

“What would you suggest I do to strengthen it?”

“What message do you think the audience took away?”

People are reluctant to risk telling us more than we want to know. Persistence makes requests for honest feedback clear and credible.

*Stay Appreciative*

The risk of asking for feedback is that you may be disappointed in what you hear. If that’s true, say so—the other person will sense it anyway. But don’t defend your actions or explain why the feedback is wrong. You don’t have to believe or act on everything that others tell you, but you want to hear them and respond in ways that encourage them to keep communicating. Be sure to thank anyone who tries to help. If you respond to feedback by rejecting it, criticizing it, or inducing guilt, the flow of future offerings will dry up quickly.

Skilled and confident academic leaders make it a point to regularly seek feedback from peers, subordinates, bosses, and other key stakeholders. Colleagues can also agree to support each other with open feedback. A seasoned coach or mentor is another alternative. Deep learning, the Talmud teaches, is only achieved in company.

**Test Assumptions and Attributions**

When others do things we find puzzling or infuriating, the temptation is to attribute unfavorable motives and thoughts to them and then to act on those attributions as if they were true. But none of us is 100 percent accurate in interpreting why others do what they do, and we often make difficult situations worse by operating on the basis of untested attributions. A better alternative is to ask others what they mean, what they intend, or how they are thinking.

In Sarah’s performance review with George, for example, she believed George was trying to deflect the conversation away from...
his performance by his comments on her junior status and comparative inexperience. Sarah never mentioned this to George, but she got angry and began to pound harder (and louder) on him. As an alternative, Sarah might have surfaced her assumption with something like, “George, are you wanting to discuss my performance or yours?” If George is playing a game, as Sarah believes, then her question alerts him. His defensive maneuvers may be so automatic and overlearned that the question might help him see what he is doing. George may want to discuss Sarah’s performance, and a confident Sarah would want that feedback. She could even ask, “Would it help to discuss your perceptions of me first?” But that is not a substitute for George’s annual review.

Testing assumptions in this way can lead to learning for both Sarah and George. Sarah might learn that she can handle difficult people without being controlled by their aggression or her fears. This is important for us all. It is essential for young professionals and for women who, research tells us, are more often the brunt of uncivil behavior in higher education classrooms (Goodyear, Reynolds, & Gragg, 2010; Schmidt, 2010a) and other campus work environments (Freyd & Johnson, 2010; Sadler, n.d.; Riger, n.d.; Twale & De Luca, 2008). George may be acting out gender politics or playing the age-old intellectual game of self-protection through deflection and sarcasm. He may be unaware that not everyone finds his style charming—and that others who view him as hard to handle might choose to exclude him from events and critical conversations. If no one calls George’s game, he’ll probably keep on playing it. Sarah’s question might help George become more aware of his tactics and their consequences.

Work on Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry
Some leaders advocate far more than they inquire. Others do the opposite. Paying attention to your patterns can help you assess the appropriate balance for your purposes. Effective academic leaders are versatile and skilled in both areas. But effectiveness is reflected not only in the amount of each but in the quality of the effort. Quantity is easier to assess—and focusing on balance is a good entry point for academic leaders new to these issues. Improving the quality of advocacy and inquiry is harder. Good advocacy is complex. It is the ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. That means talking about your take on reality and the reasoning behind your diagnoses and decisions without discouraging others from doing the same. Inquiry involves skills in listening, reflecting what you hear to test accuracy, and crafting questions that enable you to learn the things you need to know. You won’t get that from asking leading questions that manipulate the answer. Yes/no questions will get you a brief response but may reveal little about what others think, feel, or know. Good inquiry uses questions of how, what, and why to get people talking about things that matter.

Learn About Your Theories-in-Use
The Sarah and George case exemplifies a useful learning tool. Writing a two-sided case in the same format that Sarah used is something you can do before or after an unusually tough situation. Take a piece of paper and divide it in half. Write a short dialogue that reflects what you said (or anticipate saying) and how others responded (or how you think they will) in the left-hand column. Add what you were thinking but didn’t (or wouldn’t) say in the right. You may be surprised to see what you choose to say and not to say. Write these cases on different situations that you face over time, and you’ll get new clarity about your strengths, comfort zones, and flat spots. Keep them as a record of your professional growth.

The two-sided case is a specific form of scenario building that we discussed at the end of Chapter Two. It’s a low-risk way to rehearse the future. You’ll think more deeply about your intended strategies, how you want to talk with others, and the possible consequences. The case can also tell you how optimistic or pessimistic you are about the situation and reveal what you are reluctant
to discuss or make public. Knowing that in advance can enable you to develop and practice new strategies—and build your confidence and communication skills. Remember: the undiscussable issues are often the keys for steering a difficult conversation in a positive direction.

If you use a case to reflect after the fact about what you might have done differently, enlist a trusted friend, coach, or colleague to help. The things we don’t know about ourselves are hard for us to see without help from someone else. Case writers almost always struggle to see gaps and options that are transparent to others. Take heart! With practice and persistence, you’ll improve the alignment of your actions with your purposes.

Summary

Leadership works when relationships work—and fails when they don’t. Leaders’ self-awareness and interpersonal skills are central to their effectiveness, but are often insufficient for the challenges of academic leadership. When relationships go awry, leaders often know what they intended, but not what they did to contribute to unsatisfactory outcomes. As a result, they often blame others instead of learning how to do things better. The best leaders are persistent and proactive in reflecting on their behavior and in learning from those around them. They seek feedback, test assumptions, work on balancing advocacy and inquiry, and learn about their own habitual patterns of action.

Note

1. Readers interested in additional information about how to construct or use this kind of case for learning can find details in Argyris and Schön (1974), or Senge (1990a and b).