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Book review

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Understanding Power and Leadership in Higher Education: Tools for institutional change, by Mark Kretovics

New York: Routledge; 2020; 234 pp.; ISBNs: 978-1-13834-179-1 (pbk); 978-1-13834-176-0 (hbk); 978-0-42943-997-1 (ebk)



Many of us will have come across someone in a leadership role whose behaviour resembled that of the newly appointed President of the University of Akron, Ohio, whose first action in the job was to require his senior staff to sign a 28-point list of 'leadership and management principles'. As Mark Kretovics notes in his new book, this list consisted mainly of statements of the obvious – 'commit oneself to be a member of the team', and so on – but it was the requirement that senior colleagues should literally sign up to them that caused offence. As one of these principles was about not 'wasting money or other resources', it was probably then a mistake for the President to spend nearly US\$1 million in his first year in office (he lasted less than two) on renovating his official residence, and – as with all good expenses scandals – it was the telling detail of the claim for 'a \$556 decorative olive jar' (162) that suggested that this presidency was not going to end well.

Olive jars apart, what was wrong with the President's approach? Laying down the law to senior colleagues is hardly ever a good idea in a collegiate environment,

carrying as it does the implication that colleagues cannot otherwise be trusted to do their jobs properly. This poor start was followed by a series of failed attempts at organizational change without apparently building any prior consensus about them. It is not clear what the President's previous experience had been in higher education, but he clearly had a tin ear when it came to listening to what was going on inside his own university.

A strength of Kretovics's book is its wealth of arresting anecdotes about university leadership. The best ones, naturally, are about where it has gone wrong, as at Akron. There are parallels here with the earlier study by Keller (1983) about leadership and strategic change in American universities. Mercifully, Kretovics does not detain us long with what passes as theory about leadership, in higher education or elsewhere, but dives into the daily life of the university and surfaces with a haul of war stories, some anonymized, but many with names and job titles attached – as should be the case. The book's coverage is entirely American, but we could easily come across many of its characters in universities around the world. We see American university exceptionalism, however, when it comes to intercollegiate athletics and the scandals that seem inseparable from it: the dispiriting list of leadership failures here that Kretovics provides should make university leaders elsewhere thankful that they do not have to try to prevent the ethical failures of athletics programmes from infecting university life more broadly.

The publishers seem to have missed a trick in not subtitled this book 'How to get promoted to senior university management', which is what it is largely about: again, despite the entirely American context, the advice is applicable more widely. Kretovics's account of the use of power within universities, and how to use it to your career advantage, makes several perceptive points: his analysis of the technique of 'gaining power by giving power away' (110) will resonate with those of us who have been fortunate to work for outstanding university leaders, who understood 'that by delegating and empowering you create a more engaged and functional environment' (111). Kretovics pinpoints here the fundamental leadership skill of making subordinates feel good about themselves.

There is a tendency among Europeans, in particular, to speak of 'American universities' or 'the US university system'. There is in fact no American university system as such, but a complex, overlapping, institutional pattern of large and small, old and new, public and private, for-profit and non-profit, denominational and secular, research-intensive and teaching-focused – in total comprising what the American educationist David Labaree (2017) has called 'a perfect mess'. Just as people from outside Britain sometimes think that Oxford and Cambridge typify British universities (it appears sometimes as if Oxford and Cambridge universities think they do as well), so non-Americans sometimes seem to assume that Harvard, Stanford and Yale typify American universities. The everyday reality of US university life is instead composed of institutions more like those studied here by Kretovics, which include the University of Akron (Ohio), Baylor University (Texas), Central Washington University (Washington State), the University of South Florida, Trocaire College (New York), Winthrop University (South Carolina) and Youngstown State University (Ohio). It is probably fair to say that universities such as these do not spring immediately to mind when most of us think of American higher education, but this is precisely why Kretovics's book is valuable in helping us gain a more balanced view of how the world's most complex higher education non-system works.

References

- Keller, G. (1983) *Academic Strategy: The management revolution in American higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Labaree, D. (2017) *A Perfect Mess: The unlikely ascendancy of American higher education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.