



SIES School of Learning and Leadership Development (SISSLDD)

TRAINING NOTE (001/2026-27)

on

**Leadership at Institute Level:
Most Crucial Driver of Influence**

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Backdrop:

Leadership plays a crucial role in the success or otherwise of any business enterprise or for that matter of any journey of life, say a sports team. Wherever there are more than a few individuals working for the same unified objective, the most important driver is “leadership” and his / her traits to drive the team. This is equally true for an academic institution from schools to multi-disciplinary universities. Tough, determined, focused, passionate and “ability to carry on people” type of leaders have often been to be successful even in difficult circumstances. With a huge landscape of around 15 lakh schools, 50,000 higher education institutions and 1,500 universities, leadership issues become even more crucial as each institution of this universe has some leader and in some cases more than one, making the number large to comprehend. And in India, this has been one area of concern coming in the way of institutions becoming the centers of excellence in terms of international norms. As the market becomes more complex with increasing internalization and competition, this aspect must be tackled immediately, if India is to reclaim the position of “Viswaguru.”

Attributes of An Academic Leader:

There is no single universal attribute for an academic leader; summations of several competencies make a “good leader.” However, some of the often-found common denominators of a “good leadership” of academic institutions include the following:

Inspirational Teacher: This is the starting point; a good leader of an academic institution must have acceptability from the most important stakeholders i.e., the “students.” And that can only come if he / she is an inspirational teacher.

Respected Researcher: The other important aspect is that the teacher should be acknowledged as a good researcher in his / her own domain. The above two qualities imply that one needs to be good in “academic standards” before one can aspire to become a “good leader.”

Networking Ability: Networking is key to success; a good academic leader must have adequate “networking reach” with various stakeholders like parents, alumni, corporate, NGOs, among others so that he / she can fall back upon their support in case of any need.

Liaison Skills: Our research shows that more than 80 per cent time of a top leader in an academic institute in India like Principal, or Director / Dean

or Vice Chancellor is spent in liaison with government, regulatory bodies, accreditation agencies, etc. Therefore, a good leader is one who has tremendous patience and versatility to deal with such bodies, which sometime may be quite taxing.

Uncanny Vision: This is crucial in today's context; while the concept of vision has always been associated with the term leadership, today's vision must be keeping in mind the extremely volatile and unpredictable nature of society and life. Therefore, the vision has to be sometimes short-term, flexible, unknown future scanning, etc.: the terms that are normally not associated with vision in the classical sense. Sometimes, the actions must be unpredictable & tangential: not normally expected. You need "different types of leaders" for these types of "differing versions" of vision in the current times.

Hands-On Leadership: These are the times we need leaders who can lead teams, from the front, at times of difficulty and / or crisis, which comes very often; like a bad placement season or many students performing badly in a subject, etc. The classical definition of leadership remains the same: leader is one who "knows the way" (vision), "goes the way" (leads from the front) and "shows the way" (motivates the team members to go along with him / her).

Competency Based Empathy: Every employee will have some strengths as well as some weaknesses; for example, one can be an outstanding teacher but may not be an excellent researcher. A good academic leader is one who pats on the back of the teacher for his / her outstanding classroom performance and compliments him / her publicly rather than asking him / her to improve the research domain. Dealing with weaknesses often leads to demotivation of the employees, particularly for those who are particularly good in some specific domain.

Moving Ahead:

The above are some of the must needed competencies for an academic leader at a unit level: school, college, or university. Can we find such a person competent in all aspects of function: is it a realistic proposition? Or can we develop these traits? The fact of the matter is that we are not living in ideal world and therefore, to expect a leader to possess all the attributes is an illusion. The objective of this piece is that we as leaders should try to assess ourselves where we stand vis-a-vis the desired competencies and try to improve wherever we lack. Similarly, the potential leaders

should also plan the future career map keeping in view the above competencies. Some of these leadership traits are inborn; some can be developed through conscious and deliberate efforts. Learning institutions like SIESLLD can play a big role through the leadership development programs. However, fact remains that leadership of an academic institution in this complex world is a difficult task and mental set up is the most crucial. If you are ready to accept the challenge, other things will automatically follow.

Based on write-up by Dr A K Sen Gupta, Director, SIESLLD in Free Press Journal FPJ on 30th March 2026.