


# Why Are Our Academic Institutions Failing?

 By Prof Dato' Dr Noor Azizi Ismail on 20 April 2023

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A few days ago, after the Tarawih prayer, I had a coffee chat with some good friends. We talked past midnight. It was a very rare late-night outing for me, but a fruitful one. Being senior academicians, you would expect that our topics of discussion would include the future of higher education and university leadership. That was precisely what our chat centred around.

All but one of us have spent more than 30 years in academia. Over the past three decades, we have seen the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of the system. One of us, a senior academic friend, took the first shot and expressed his concern that capable leaders were disappearing from our higher education. What we see now is the emergence of incompetent but *playing-it-safe* leaders, he sighted. It is a worrying trend.

## What Went Wrong?

Four equally disastrous scenarios conspire to increase the number of incompetent leaders we now have in our academic institutions.

First, the system rewards and perpetuates incompetent leaders. I remember reading a LinkedIn post by David Wee from the National University of Singapore. The gist of the post is that good leaders are being replaced by incompetent ones. Wee argued that incompetent leaders are multiplying because they don't get fired! They retain their positions by playing it safe. They avoid making big decisions and hesitate to take definitive actions. So they can never be wrong.

Second, incompetent leaders are "yes-men." They never say no to the big bosses, even when they know the bosses are wrong. Their mantra is, "protect your position at all costs, even if that means supporting the big boss to run the ship aground". That mantra, as sensible people would know, is not only selfish but an exercise in self-destructiveness. But hey, those guys don't see beyond their power and position.

It came to my mind that if all my former bosses had hated me for having different opinions and being rebellious at times, I might not have been appointed as a Dean, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Director General of Higher Education, and Vice-Chancellor. I learned that great leaders guide and groom, and they find the most creative ways to sell and communicate their visions. Even when they would ignore other people's opinions and go with their own ideas, they do so with great humility and respect for other's views. The last thing a great leader would do is punish downlines who, from all indications, merely want things to get better. They welcome criticism.

Unfortunately, things have changed. Being different is no longer welcomed. You will be treated as an enemy and sidelined. This is why many chose the safest option: to keep quiet. A common piece of advice we often hear these days is, "Why put yourself in trouble? Just follow the flow, and everything will be fine".

Third, incompetent leaders know how to sing (and dance to) the tunes. They may be incompetent where it matters most, but they come alive in the game of deception. They may lack vision and have poor strategies for making an impact, but give it to them; they are pros at doing and being evil. They know how to manipulate the system for their own benefit. They rush to claim credit for results they know nothing about, and at the same time, they are adept at throwing others under the bus when things go wrong.

Fourth, incompetent academic leaders, like some politicians, love to be surrounded by apple polishers who would nod to every word they said, and make them feel and look good. Worse, incompetent leaders do not keep talented staff and certainly have no business with succession planning. Rather, they groom weak disciples who admire their 'cleverness'. The disciples copy their destructive values and behaviours. And the circle continues, leading to more incompetent leaders.

Without our realising it, these weak leaders and their disciples spread the incompetent disease, a deadly disease that will eventually strangle the institution. "Yes-men" culture kills innovation, as it prevents the healthy debates necessary for arriving at well-considered and optimal ideas.

Needless to say, it is the systems that pick up the pieces. Clever as they are, these incompetent leaders know when to let go and quickly latch on to a new host before the institutions they lead to collapse. Unfortunately, they leave behind pockets of disciples and 'warlords' who would continue to create chaos, further undermining the growth and development of the organisations.

## Lessons From the Past

A person's sense of morality lessens as his or her power increases. Remember the powerful statement by Lord Acton, a British historian of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? He said, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Acemoglu and Robinson, in their book, *Why Nations Fail*, dived into the reasons why economic inequality is so common in the world today. They identified poor decisions by those in political power as the main reason for unfairness rather than culture, geography, climate, or any other factor.

*Discover Your True North* by Bill George is one of my all-time favourite books. George discussed authentic leadership. Authentic leaders require self-awareness, values, and an understanding of their life story in order to lead with purpose and passion. He also gave examples of those leaders who lost track of their True North. They are classified as imposters, rationalisers, glory seekers, loners, and shooting stars, all of whom have a tendency to become self-centred and prevent others from leading.

When I was the Vice-Chancellor, many people advised me to prioritise taking care of the big boss. But I wondered whom we were serving. In higher education, our clients are the students. Our responsibility as university leaders is to ensure our students receive the best education, become better and more responsible individuals upon graduation, and, most importantly, be able to secure quality jobs. Leaders must practise what they preach.

Does it worth the effort? For me, focusing more on the future of my students has always been worth the effort. But of course, I always knew that not everyone was on the same page with that idea. I was never naïve about the danger that taking that path could bring upon me. In the end, what are we if not men of ethics and integrity?

## Good Leadership

Having a small circle of true friends to check our egos will keep us from the dark side of leadership!

Great leaders are open to criticism. They see it as a learning process to pivot, renew, and reinvent themselves. It is a natural part of leadership. They understand that leadership is not a popularity contest. It is always about doing what is in the best interest of the organisation. If no one is criticising your leadership, it means you are not leading correctly.

Unfortunately, I have seen many academic leaders easily get offended and defensive. They focus more on their reputation and sometimes overreact rather than evaluate the situation at hand. Many choose confrontation over compromise. When criticised, we still hear Vice-Chancellors (VC) say, "That is my power as the VC" or "Who is the VC, you or me"?

Glenn Llopis, the author of *Leadership in the Age of Personalisation*, suggests four ways leaders can handle criticism. First, leaders shouldn't play the victim. Leaders must demonstrate that they can endure pressure, intensity, and uncertainty. Second, leaders shouldn't react impulsively. They must show a high level of composure and executive presence. Third, leaders shouldn't take criticisms personally. A leader must be mindful not to get overly attached to the issues at hand.

Finally, leaders must own criticism and convert it into new opportunities previously unseen. Leadership is not about being perfect. Leadership is an exercise in course correction, and that requires a lot of open-mindedness.

## Conclusion

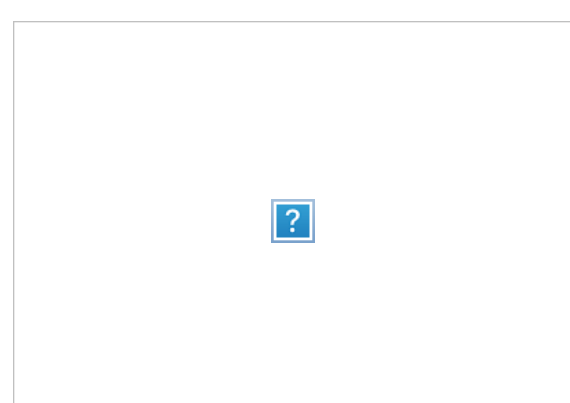
Throughout the two-hour chat I had with my academic friends (mentioned at the beginning of this discussion), I wanted to interject to share my experience and thoughts. But I chose to listen rather than talk, just nodding in agreement. I was probably tired of talking about the issue. Who would listen, anyway? But listening to my friends' blabbering made my coffee cold—it was time to go home.

What is the lesson learned from the night out?

I wish to take the spirit of Ramadan, a time of reflection and looking inward, and emerge as a better person. One of my important learnings has been the concept of acceptance – accepting things that we cannot change. When I was young, I used to try to change things that were beyond my control and fight against the flow. Then I learned from Rumi Jalaluddin, who famously said, "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself." I believe I am much wiser now.

Deciding what battles to fight and what to push forward has helped my peace of mind and reduced my stress level immensely. I am still learning.

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