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## Thriving in Leadership: Strategies for Making a Difference in Christian Higher Education

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*Thriving in Leadership: Strategies for Making a Difference in Christian Higher Education.*

Karen A. Longman (ed.). (2012).  
Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press.

Reviewed by Paul Blezien



Karen Longman clearly conveys the purpose of *Thriving in Leadership: Strategies for Making a Difference in Christian Higher Education* when she writes, “[it] is written out of a concern that Christian higher education must have exceptional leadership if the complex challenges facing today’s colleges and universities are to be effectively addressed” (p. 27). This book is a compilation of essays that comprehensively examine the issue of academic and administrative leadership from many perspectives. Whether the authors are bearing witness to the role of leadership in specific situational circumstances like a significant institutional turnaround or addressing general themes integral to effective leadership in Christian higher education, they faithfully and artfully weave their mind and hearts into this book. The depth of their intellectual scholarship and the impact of the stories they share—many of them offering vulnerable personal testimony—combine to maximize the impact of the truths they offer.

The clear and somewhat paradoxical theme which emerges from the many excellent voices expressed in the book is best articulated by Gordon T. Smith (2012):

The very best institutional leadership is evident, in part, in the quality of concern that is manifested for the people who make up the institution. And yet, the essence of academic leadership is institutional: thinking about mission and all that it will take for mission to be accomplished. (p. 17)


How do we strike the balance between the importance of relationships with those being led and the efforts necessary to advance and fulfill the mission of the institution? *Thriving in Leadership* provides excellent insights on answering that question. The image of an automobile comes to mind as we try to understand that delicate balance. The mission is the motor that propels the vehicle to the places God intends for it. Relationships and the resulting trust are the lubricant and coolant that causes the engine to run well and keep it from overheating when being pushed to and beyond its limits.

Longman and the various authors explore the integral nature of relationships to success in leadership. The first section leads the reader through an introspective journey in understanding one's relationship to oneself and to one's God. This flows well into the second section which provides perspective on how to relate well to those one leads and serves. The second section is a reservoir of wise counsel on subjects such as fostering trust, navigating cultural dynamics, mentoring, and developing strong leadership teams. The final section addresses the complex and compelling notion of one's relationship with the institution one is serving as well as leading in a way that enhances the ability of those one leads to relate well with one another and the entire organization and its mission.

As a 'seasoned' professional, I found myself wishing that I would have had access to a book like this much earlier in my career. Although there are a number of new insights for me to consider, much of what I read affirmed previous learning. This did not make the book less valuable since the lessons were certainly worth being affirmed and the contributors offered them in a way that drove them deep into the mind and spirit. Whether you are someone new to the ministry and profession of serving in Christian higher education or you are one with a wealth of experience, there are many ways that you will be able to immediately apply the lessons offered in this book. For example, in response to Jeanine Varner's chapter on mentoring, I prayerfully considered who at my school was on a trajectory towards leadership in a Christian academic setting. Each of the seven people who emerged from that discernment exercise received this book as a gift with an invitation to participate in a group study of *Thriving in Leadership*. The authors include discussion questions at the end of each chapter to facilitate conversational processing of the topics being addressed.

This particular group included both faculty and staff and all of them accepted the invitation. To a person, they all said that this was one of the richest experiences they have ever had either professionally or personally. The group study was an opportunity for each of us, within the context of community, to walk through the three-step progression of relationships discussed above. It is reasonable to assume that the seeds of wisdom and insight planted as a result of this exercise will bear fruit in support of the purpose of this book, that is, to equip leaders to deal with the challenges they will face in the future as leaders in Christian higher education.

It is worth noting that *Thriving in Leadership* has what might be seen as a perceptible bias towards a faculty audience. This in no way detracts from the value of the book. Student development professionals in Christian higher education will want to avoid the trap of seeing this book as less relevant for their practice. The wisdom and lessons offered are applicable to all in higher education. In fact, the staff who participated in the discussion group mentioned above felt it provided them a golden opportunity to better understand faculty culture and values.

Hopefully, when the concepts of this book are understood and applied by faithful servants within a Christian higher educational setting, God's purpose and plans will unfold. Ultimately, this will happen in a way that advances the missions at our respective institutions and perpetuates itself in the lives of the students entrusted to us. As Christian higher education leaders invest into the faculty and staff, they, in turn, will invest into the students in their realms of influence. The students will be impacted in a way that empowers them to impact others. Among many potential outcomes of *Thriving in Leadership*, one could be, as Shirley Showalter states in her chapter, "All of us had abandoned ourselves to the students whose energy, creativity, and insights inspired us" (p. 182). 

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