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## Caring Leadership as Collective Responsibility

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## **Caring leadership as collective responsibility**

### **Abstract**

What constitutes caring leadership within a university environment? In addressing this question, I examine current discussions on care, leadership and higher education before turning to explore Hannah Arendt's ideas about care, which was an important aspect of her relational approach to leadership. She was adamant that this kind of leadership was rarely found in universities, further arguing a kind of professional deformation pervaded academia, encouraging self-interest rather than collective well-being. Some professors live in a fantasy world, Arendt argued, failing to recognize how their actions demonstrate a care for self over a care for others. After exploring discourses of care and leadership, I illustrate her claim by examining how Martin Heidegger's leadership actions demonstrate how privileging a particular vision can result in carelessness toward others. Finally, I show how an Arendtian approach offers insight into what it might mean to lead caringly.

**Keywords:** Arendt; care; Heidegger; education; leadership; universities.

## **Introduction**

One day when I was walking to campus last summer, I noticed a new sign outside one of the university colleges. The sign read “Leaders with heart since 1863.” I wondered what this message was trying to convey to passers-by. Was it some sort of postmodern riff on zombie leadership? Unlikely, I thought, given that this particular College has a reputation for conservatism. What, then, was the purpose of this sign that informed passers-by that this institution had a proud tradition of electing caring leaders? Perhaps it was a signal to the rest of the community that care was integral to how this particular College perceived its leaders? Of course, a cynic might remark that this particular College has had four different leaders in ten years. Although its leaders may have hearts, they certainly do not appear to have institutional sticking power. And sticking power would seem to be a vital component of institutional leadership, along with a tenacity of purpose and a willingness to care for others. These musings lead me to ask: what constitutes caring leadership within a university environment?

To address this question, I explore Hannah Arendt’s ideas about care, or lack thereof, as it emerges in university life. She (1958) was adamant that leadership founded on care and mutual respect was rarely to be found in most bureaucratic environments, which encouraged a kind of “no man’s leadership,” whereby employees hide behind policies and procedures rather than connecting with each person on an individual level. Moreover, Arendt (1994) contended there was a kind of professional deformation that pervaded academic life, encouraging and rewarding self-interest over collective well-being. This professional deformation, she argued, leads some professors to live in a fantasy world, whereby they fail to recognize how their actions exemplify self-regard over and above regard for others. In short, caring for one’s academic career can result in a carelessness toward others. This was particularly noticeable, Arendt argued, when some intellectuals became institutional leaders. The issues that she raises are, I will argue, still relevant today.

This chapter unfolds as follows. First, I will explore the meaning of care, demonstrating how this common phrase has multiple and, seemingly, contradictory meanings. Second, I will explore current research on care and leadership. Here we find that, unlike other institutions such as health care or the corporate sector, there is little scholarship that examines care and leadership within higher education institutions. I want to delve into what it means to care within the higher education context, and why caring matters to leadership in these spaces. In much of the literature on care and leadership, there is an assumption that caring matters to leaders. But, is that care borne out in practice? In answering this question, I explore examples of caring leadership, or lack thereof, focusing on university life. Martin Heidegger plays something of a “fall guy” in this exploration. In his writing, he shows how important care is to the human condition; yet, when it came to his own leadership praxis, it appears caring for others was overshadowed by his visionary desire to effect institutional change. In the final section, I explore Arendt’s understand of care and leadership to sketch out how an Arendtian approach can offer insights into what it might mean to lead caringly.

## **Care**

Care is a funny old word when you think about it with lots of different meanings. For example, I often end my emails “take care.” I am not sure when or why I began to use this particular salutation; I think I was bored with putting “best wishes,” or “regards” at the end of my emails. In any event, to take care suggests that you want the recipient to look after themselves. When we use care in this way, it can also refer to alerting others to mind how they go. For example, we might tell someone to “take care,” so as to alert them to a possible danger ahead, or when we sense that a friend or colleague is under undue stress. In taking care, then, we show concern for the other person’s well-being.

An alternative way of speaking of care is to say “She doesn’t have a care in the world.” Here, to be free of care is something that we might wish for others, or be envious of, since to be carefree is

usually deemed to be fortunate. Somewhat confusingly, however, a popular saying among North American students is “I could care less,” which leaves the hearer somewhat befuddled as to whether care, or its converse, is implied. This befuddlement is also apparent “across the pond,” in the U.K. context, whereby the North American phrase “I could care less” is translated into “I couldn’t care less.” No wonder that second language learners have problems with English idioms, for it seems that we are unsure whether we care a lot, a little, or not at all.

Care’s meaning alters radically when we say that someone is careless. To be perceived as careless is not the same as being free of care. Rather careless, and its mate carelessness, suggest a lack of concern with what one is doing, and a lack of consideration for others. To be careless, then, seems to infer a certain selfishness in one’s attitude. Alternatively, we sometimes say that someone is careful, which does not mean that they are overwhelmed by care but rather risk averse, an attribute usually seen as a negative quality for a leader. Besides, for some readers, being careful might conjure up memories of characters from literature such as Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, whose carefulness was a kind of pedantry. In any case, one has to be careful about the ways in which we enact, or fail to, enact care.

By exploring different linguistic usages of care we see that, as Heidegger tells us, words are wellsprings whose meanings change constantly. In short, care shows up differently in different contexts. This contextual aspect of care is something that I now want to explore by looking at how leadership scholars have conceptualized care. Through this exploration, we may gain insight into what current scholarship can teach us about what constitutes caring leadership, or lack thereof, in an organizational context.

## **Care and leadership**

In a recent library keyword search, I discovered 14,800 articles that mentioned caring and leadership. The bulk of these articles focused on leadership and health care. In that same search, only ten

articles specified higher education, care and leadership. Given that education is one of the caring professions, it seems surprising that few scholars have reflected, in print, about care in these spaces. Much of the scholarship that does exist is underpinned by popular psychology (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). A good example is a study conducted by Uusiautti (2013) that connects caring leadership with positive organizational scholarship. In her comparative study of higher education administrators in Finland and the USA, Uusiautti asked her research participants to describe caring leadership. Most participants described caring leadership as involved in turning a personal vision into reality. Caring leadership was also described as action oriented, and leaders described the importance of celebrating success through campus events, and the importance of dealing with difficult situations promptly. These leaders viewed care through the giving and receiving timely feedback. This type of caring leadership, it is argued, enhances productivity among followers, resulting in a positive work environment.

Uusiautti further asserts that caring leadership is about “leaders’ ability to use their position in a manner that exemplifies love-based action” (p. 4). She sees leaders’ loving action as connected with a Platonic idea of the good. However, Arendt (1958) contends that emotions like love are private concerns. As such, a focus on love is inappropriate for the public space because loving relations privilege particular persons over others. Thus, the ideal of a campus enriched by loving relationships is not one that Arendt would share, since such relationships may not only privilege some persons over others, but also restrict dialogue and debate, key aspects of a flourishing environment.

For Akbari, Kashani and Chaijani (2016), sharing is at the heart of caring leadership. Their research, based on surveys and interviews with 70 university teams, indicates that, when leadership is shared amongst different people, there is greater potential for an enriched working environment. As such, sharing leadership creates an environment that promotes functional, as opposed to dysfunctional behaviors. Thus, these scholars conclude that sharing begets a caring approach.

Yet ideas of caring and sharing in leadership are complicated when gender identity is foregrounded. In her reflections on chairing a department, Acker (2012) notes how gendered assumptions affect leadership. Women leaders, for example, are expected to act in caring ways, expectations that male leaders do not have to the same extent. From her perspective, being perceived as a caring leader is shaped by attitudes toward gender norms. These attitudes, in turn, influences societal discourses about caring and leadership.

Care is a vital aspect in how followers judge leaders (Gabriel, 2015a). Followers, it seems, expect leaders to use their moral courage to promote collective, rather than selfish, ends. What this suggests is that many followers desire careful rather than careless leaders. Considering how caring enriches leadership is important, because it places an emphasis on how followers prefer leaders who are willing to develop nurturing relationships with others. From this perspective, choosing to lead in a caring way demonstrates concern for others' well-being. Such concern requires an attentiveness to one's environment, and the diverse needs of those within it. This way of leading requires leaders to not only be effective in their duties, but also to respond to others in a sensitive manner (Ciulla, 2009).

Such sensitivity to the needs of others is not always apparent in university life. Some scholars contend that higher education institutions demonstrate a lack of care, primarily as a result of the neoliberal turn in universities (Dowling, 2017). The neoliberal model places the emphasis on economic metrics whereby students are regarded as consumers, and faculty as mobilizers of particular forms of commodifiable knowledge. For their part, institutional leaders face increasing pressure from government funders and Board members to enhance specific metrics, such as growth in student numbers, international reputation and fund-raising revenue. At times, the pursuit of institutional success can cover over a deeper understanding of the purpose of education. Too much focus on individual success can lead to calls for learning that is socially relevant and market driven. But this desire for learning to connect with the marketplace encourages a reduced understanding of education (Paolantonio, 2016). It also

encourages the single-minded pursuit of a particular kind of institutional success, one that can be measured through international rankings or specific research output. But these numerical aspects of university life sit uneasily with another prevailing discourse, that of, of institutional well-being and student flourishing. In short, there is intense competition affecting what university personnel should care about.

Increasingly, ideas of caring leadership are connected with efforts to promote student well-being. Improving student well-being is deemed critical, especially given the rise in student anxiety and mental health concerns. At my university, I recently attended an event where a Vice President announced a new approach to combat student mental health issues. Instead of long wait lists, common in many North American universities, students would now be seen quickly as a result of the introduction of a new step care program. No longer will it be necessary for each student to meet with a counsellor, which not only takes too long but is, apparently, a costly endeavor. Instead, students will be provided with a menu of options from which to learn to manage their self-care. The fact that long waiting lists are being dealt with effectively is an important step forward in dealing with the mounting crisis of student mental health. However, when I inquired whether the links between student debt and increased anxiety were being explored as one possible cause of student distress, I was met with silence. But if we care for our students' well-being wanting to see them thrive, rather than strive, we need to address how financial insecurity is a major cause of student anxiety.

In pointing to links between student indebtedness and mental health issues, Lazzarato (2017) argues the cost of university education, especially in the United States, is leading to a life of indebtedness. Student indebtedness is partly a result of a lack of government funding and the concomitant need for ever-growing funds to fuel university growth. This increased focus on revenue has led to administrators seeking new ways to keep students in school. But this may not be the most responsible or caring course of action for university leaders to pursue. Caring for each student's personal

well-being may require having frank conversations as to whether higher education is the right path for them. In short, universities, and those who work within them, do some students a disservice in failing to encourage them to consider alternative career paths, ones that do not lead to a life of indebtedness.

Showing care requires us to focus on the individual student, rather than seeing students as a category. In Arendtian terms, this would mean that we focus on the “who” rather than the “what,” thereby considering each individual in a holistic manner. Yet this change of emphasis would take time and effort, something that many organizational leaders have little enthusiasm for because they are judged by different metrics, such as their talents as fundraisers and as organizational cheerleaders.

Furthermore, to act in a caring manner requires leaders to take care that their personal desire for success does not lead to hubris. Perhaps it would be useful at this juncture to compare Arendt’s ideas about care and leadership with those of Heidegger. Specifically, I focus on how his desire to overhaul the university system in Germany led Heidegger to act in a manner that lacked care for others.

### **Heidegger, care and leadership**

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) maintains that “Dasein’s *Being* reveals itself as care” (p. 227). It is through an acknowledgment of care that we can engage in the world without trying to dominate others. Tomkins and Simpson (2015) argue that Heideggerian notions of care can deepen our understanding of how caring manifests itself. They contend that Heideggerian care is grounded in everyday practice. Within organizational life, for example, they perceive two distinct types of care intervention. The first type is when a carer leaps in to take responsibility to resolve an issue. The second type is when a carer leaps ahead to explore future possibilities. Tomkins and Simpson further contend that a Heideggerian approach to care critiques notions of best practices in organizations, such as following rules, rather than thinking for ourselves. Indeed, they argue that caring leadership, rather than flourishing as other scholars maintain, is a fragile affair in organizational life. Finally, they suggest

caring leadership is primarily “an organization of self rather than an organization of others” (p. 13).

Too much focus on self can demonstrate a mode of being-in-the-world that ignores care. This is the mode of indifference. In displaying indifference we demonstrate a carelessness toward others. Such careless indifference was demonstrated by Heidegger when he took on an administrative leadership role, to which I now turn.

In April 1933, Heidegger was elected Rector of Freiburg University. In his Inaugural Address, he argued that the purpose of the Rectorate was to provide “spiritual leadership,” and an unwavering commitment to the university’s mission. To achieve this goal, Heidegger (1985) maintained that what was needed were “leaders and guardians [who] possess the strictest clarity of the highest, widest, and richest knowledge” (p. 476). Such leaders needed to hold fast to their specific vocation, and keep a resolute stance. He called for a complete transformation of the university from a “technical organization-institutional pseudo-unity” into a genuine place of learning. However, Heidegger had little opportunity to realize this vision, because his leadership proved unpopular with faculty, students and his Nazi overlords. After just over a year, in April 1934, he resigned.

Reflecting upon this leadership experience, Heidegger (1985) states that his unpopularity as a leader was because of his indifference to the minutiae of institutional life. Instead of focusing on administrative issues, it was his spiritual vision of a renewed form of educational life that propelled him forward. Thus, Heidegger’s purpose in becoming Rector was to effect wholesale institutional change in higher education. In modern parlance, we might say that he wanted to become a change agent, instilling his particular vision onto all aspects of university life. Forging caring relationships was less important to him than establishing a modern university based on Platonic ideals. What Heidegger’s reflection reveals, however, is how leaders with strong personal visions can become myopic in their visionary zeal. Such myopia can result in a lack of care for others, as well as poor judgement. This lack of judgement can be seen in Heidegger’s own admission of his indifference to others (Gardiner, 2015).

Heidegger's stated indifference to others highlight something that Gabriel (2015a) argues is critical to followers; namely, a leader needs to demonstrate care for those around them. Those leaders who are propelled by a particular vision may not fully recognize the importance of ensuring they not only stay in touch with, but demonstrate care for others. I suggest this demonstration of caring leadership is relevant to how Arendt perceives the activity of leading.

### **Care and leadership through an Arendtian lens**

Care was an important aspect not only of how Arendt (1958) perceived leadership, but also how she perceived relationships more broadly. In her view, our commonplace ideas about leadership stem from an obsession with leaders. Instead of being focused on the leader, for Arendt, leadership functions best when it arises out of individuals working together. When individuals find common cause, they discover the strength that emerges from their collective action (Gardiner, 2015). Yet thinking about leadership as collective action is, Arendt argues, overshadowed by the modern emphasis on leaders. Arendt (1958) traces this way of thinking about leadership all the way back to Plato. She maintains he wanted to create a society founded upon laws to assuage the problems caused by the unpredictability inherent in action. But along with Plato's emphasis on law-making, the notion of the sovereign leader emerged. When the focus is on the sovereign leader, Arendt argues, we become enamored by the notion of a strong man who can help us deal with whatever predicament we face. But too much focus on any one person is dangerous to our collective well-being since it separates that individual from others. This separation ushered in a hierarchical way, which Arendt argues is not leadership, but a form of rulership (Gardiner, 2015). When we privilege the individual in this manner, it leads to a hierarchy in human relationships that Arendt regarded as anathema to human flourishing.

Today, this hierarchical approach is apparent in much of the leadership literature whereby one person is denoted as unique (the leader) while others are seen as interchangeable (the followers). Yet this

way of thinking contradicts something basic to an Arendtian view of the human condition, namely, that we are all unique individuals living in a plural world. When we view people as followers, we view people as an amorphous category, rather than as unique individuals. Conversely, too much focus on the leader can encourage a lack of responsibility on the part of others. That is, followers may be more inclined to leave decision-making to those in charge. A leader's separation from others can create an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Such an atmosphere can lead to people obeying the leader's demands, without thinking through their full implication. Such unquestioning obedience can result in devastating consequences, as Arendt showed in her study on totalitarianism.

To sum up, for Arendt a focus on the individual leader covers over the original meaning of leadership as collective action. Such a view of leadership is founded on the importance of gathering a plurality of viewpoints. When this plurality of perspectives is not apparent, then the focus on care may be eroded. But what then might constitute caring leadership in an Arendtian sense? Perhaps Arendt's own actions may offer insight into this matter.

### **Arendt as caring leader?**

Arendt (1994) did not view herself as a leader, caring or otherwise, arguing that leadership was unbecoming to women. Yet, despite her prejudice against women leaders, Arendt often demonstrated care and leadership, as can be seen from the following examples. First, concerned for their well-being, during the Second World War she sent food parcels to Max Weber's wife, Marianne, and to Karl and Gertrude Jaspers. Second, Arendt worked tirelessly to get Heidegger's work published in English, and his reputation was redeemed, in part, because of her efforts on his behalf. That said, Arendt was not without criticism for her former teacher and lover, especially in regards to some of his leadership actions, which she argued demonstrated not only a lack of care, but also a lack of judgement.

Such a lack of judgement is exacerbated by a willingness to go along with a particular regime without considering the consequences for others. In reflecting upon the events in Nazi Germany, Arendt (1994) describes how what most disheartened her was how intellectuals co-operated with the Nazis, voluntarily stepping in line. As she states, “I still think that it belongs to the essence of being an intellectual that one fabricates ideas” (p. 11). Some intellectuals actually believed in Nazism, Arendt argued, because they were trapped by their ideas. Here it is difficult not to see her comments as a rebuke for Heidegger’s leadership actions. Commenting on his actions as Rector, Arendt stated what shocked her most was Heidegger’s betrayal of Edmund Husserl, his former mentor. As Rector, Heidegger signed a letter dismissing all Jewish professors. Arendt contended that Husserl would have been indifferent if the letter had been signed by someone else. But, in signing the resignation letter, Heidegger demonstrated a profound lack of care toward his former mentor. In his desire to instill a leadership vision onto the university, Heidegger failed to enact his own philosophy; namely, that care is fundamental to being-in-the-world. And such care, as Arendt (1958) teaches us, is always founded on our relationships with others.

Many leaders arrive at organizations with grand ideas, and a single-minded desire to fulfill their leadership vision. In Heidegger’s case, his leadership action in trying to revision the German university serves to demonstrate a resoluteness of purpose over and above a care for others. Yet both resoluteness and care are essential if leaders are not only going to stay true to their principles, but also to demonstrate a caring attitude toward others. Furthermore, a leader’s desire to be resolute in their decision-making can belie a more caring approach to leadership. For a leader’s action to have organizational depth and breadth, it must take into account both resoluteness of purpose and care for others. And that means enacting leadership that not only cares for self, but also cares for others.

We need leaders to have the sticking power that enables them to deal with positive and negative situations. That stickiness is enhanced by the attachments leaders develop through their relationships

with others. Building an environment where all can flourish is not an easy task, but it is one that has the potential to enrich the lives of others. And that, ultimately, seems to me an essential component of leading in a caring fashion.

## **Conclusion**

I began this inquiry by asking what constitutes caring leadership within a university environment. The argument I have put forward suggests it is not how we conceptualize care that matters; rather, it is how we enact care in, and through, our relationships that counts. This relational approach to caring represents a key distinction between Arendt and Heidegger's response to the topic of care. In particular, she implores us to remember our collective responsibility to care for the world before ourselves. Yet, her reminder seems odd at a time when too many leaders, in universities and elsewhere, chose to place self-care over and above caring for others.

Part of the problem is an over-reliance on leaders, caring or otherwise. Before his death Heidegger gave an interview to *Der Spiegel*, where he stated "only a God can save us." In simple terms, this statement highlights an overreliance on the leader-as-savior - a dangerous idea that encourages demagoguery. Alternatively, Arendt (1958) teaches us that we do not need a god to save us. Instead, we need to take up our collective responsibility to care for one another and the world. Collective responsibility necessitates a desire to care, not founded on specific rules or regulations, but enacted through everyday interactions. This way of being requires us to refrain from placing self-care before caring for the world.

At the heart of an Arendtian leadership ethics of care is a responsiveness not to self, but to others (Gardiner, 2014). This form of leadership requires educators and leaders to be willing to combine an ethic of critique with an ethic of care (Gabriel, 2015b). To foster a caring environment, we must not only be willing to critique those in power, but we must also care for those most vulnerable. Critique and care

are fundamental aspects of caring leadership, and complement Arendtian ideas of collective leadership. Although the ethic of care has been maligned, some educational leaders would benefit from a reminder to place caring for others above caring for self. In practical terms, this would mean rethinking notions of what constitute leadership success in educational spaces. Instead of caring about external accolades, the institutional focus needs to be on the community's well-being. Whether most leaders are willing to do the necessary work this type of caring demands remains unclear.

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