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The full issue of the newsletter is available online at https://us11.campaign-archive.com/?u=03fa5f26997b54f5c34aaadec&id=b32c368911

Faculty Spotlight

Do you have a research project you want highlighted? Get in touch with Ethan Ward at eward@mtroyal.ca to schedule a meeting and discuss getting your project in the spotlight.

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Leda Stawnychko - Investigating Leadership Succession at Canadian Universities

Leda Stawnychko, assistant professor of strategy and organizational theory at Mount Royal, has been fascinated by leadership since her teenage years.

At 16 she attended her first leadership conference, which led to travelling abroad, working in sustainable development and developing innovative academic programs.

Studying leadership in organizations and how it contributes to sustainability has always been Stawnychko's passion. "Without leadership we have nothing. Even if we don't identify as leaders, having leadership skills leads us to change the world for the better," Stawnychko says.

Stawnychko's research program focuses on leadership in post-secondary institutions. Specifically how teaching and research institutions can retain and support faculty through a state of constant flux, while also strengthening the leadership pipeline and leadership capacity.

Stawnychko stresses that Canadian universities are on the verge of a leadership crisis and identifies several contributing factors. They include an aging professoriate, lagging gender parity in senior faculty ranks, and faculty members' reluctance to assume and remain in leadership roles.

Stawnychko's latest research paper examines the strategic role of social networks in developing leadership capacity among university department chairs and how academics enter that position. Stawnychko conducted 17 interviews with the department chairs at a research-intensive Western Canadian university to evaluate their experiences. She found that the social networks of the prospective chairs were the primary factor getting them into leadership positions.

Rather than coming across job postings through official channels, the study found that many participants were notified about possible positions through their social networks.

Based on the findings from the research paper, Stawnychko says "It is all about your network and who you know. It is not necessarily about having a business degree or specific qualifications. When you meet someone already in the leadership context, that relationship fosters the conditions that lead to you entering a leadership position," Stawnychko says.

These strong social networks helped set expectations for what the job would entail more accurately than any official job posting. Perhaps most importantly, Stawnychko found these social networks encouraged would-be leaders to take the position in the first place.

The department chairs from the research study indicated they were initially wary of taking on the role. They went further, saying they normally would have never sought out the job until they were personally invited, encouraged, and supported by their networks, most often by their deans.

"The department chairs did not initially want the job. They did it out of a sense of duty or obligation to the university and most didn't like the position initially," Stawnychko says.

Despite these feelings, the department chairs from the study also felt they had a greater impact on their university while in the position. They could steer the direction of their department and support developing faculty, which ultimately proved to be a transformational experience.

Though these interviews reflected a positive experience, long-time leaders are starting to exit those positions and not enough academics are stepping in to replace them. Stawnychko notes that many of the department chairs she interviewed were in their sixties, and though willing to do the job again, they were retiring soon.

For Stawnychko, the findings further stress the need to hire and develop younger academics to ensure leadership succession is not broken. These positions are needed to maintain a healthy leadership pipeline, with Stawnychko stating that "the department chair role is preparatory for more senior positions, such as associate dean and dean, which in turn produce candidates for vice-president and ultimately for president."

Moving into the future, Stawnychko is also concerned with other reasons academics might not be willing to step into leadership positions, such as workplace incivility. As Stawnychko describes, the social fabric of our society is changing and universities are affected by that.

These changes include the greater prevalence of remote working and the increased use of AI, which could alter how people interact with colleagues, leaders, and employees.

"Psychological safety in the university plays into faculty members' willingness to serve in leadership positions. If they think serving in leadership is going to lead to them being mistreated, the less likely they'll want to serve," Stawnychko says. Training for conflict management and learning how to give constructive feedback in these situations will be necessary for encouraging new hires, Stawnychko states.

To further expand upon this line of research, Stawnychko has received a research grant from the Business Schools Association of Canada to explore the impact of workplace incivility. Stawnychko has also received a SSHRC Explore grant to investigate leadership succession in business schools across Canada with her collaborators, Uthpala Senarathne-Tennakoon and Janet Miller. She hopes this research will provide insights for up-and-coming research institutions like Mount Royal.