

The final dispensation: Reflections from the Editor's desk

Jackie Bruce

North Carolina State University at Raleigh, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

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February 13, 2013, began as any other Wednesday. I ran the daycare drop-off gauntlet, hunted for a far-from-ideal campus parking space, and taught a room full of students already exhibiting early-onset graduation fever. Then the phone rang, and the path of my professional life swerved: the ALE President invited me to become the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Leadership Education (JOLE)*.

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Since that call I have had a front-row seat to a dramatically changing field. This position connected me with a vibrant network of scholars and practitioners who have shaped the discipline, the *Journal*, and my own thinking. Together we've embraced and overcome some challenges and celebrated countless wins while working together to reach the ambitious goals for *JOLE*'s next chapter.

Leadership is not a solitary endeavor. *JOLE* thrives because of people rarely seen. Our Editorial Advisory Board assists in shaping the policies and procedures that continue to strengthen the *Journal*. Colleagues at FastTrack, Scholastica, 90 Degrees, and now Emerald Publishing and ScholarOne provide the infrastructure to keep each manuscript moving. Legal, library and copyright specialists at NC State offer sage counsel and keep us out of trouble. And, of course, dedicated authors and reviewers breathe life into every issue. Without this collective effort, there is no *Journal*. Creating and nurturing these relationships was crucial and the best part of my job.

This diverse array of individuals has each brought their unique perspectives, passions and, occasionally, peculiarities to the table. Engaging with authors, reviewers and colleagues has been both a source of inspiration and a lesson in patience. There were moments when I knew we were in the sweet spot, and the resulting work was better than I could have imagined. Conversely, there were instances that tested my diplomacy and resilience, reminding me that behind every manuscript is a human being with their own set of challenges and aspirations. Navigating these interactions not only honed my editorial skills but deepened my appreciation for the collaboration essential to drive our field forward.

Some of my fondest memories working with the people behind *JOLE* are with the *JOLE* Board. We've had many marathon work sessions that began with hastily consumed breakfasts (often resembling a speed-eating contest) and concluded with beverages sipped under the romantic glow of laptop screens in conference rooms—because who needs ambiance when you have policies to hash out? Despite the fatigue, we found energy in each other's company, balancing the seriousness of our work with inside jokes, often laughing until our sides ached. Our bond was so evident that at ALE conferences, attendees would joke, "If you're looking for a *JOLE* Board member, just find one—they're always together." This wasn't just about proximity; it was a testament to our unity and mutual respect. Through countless hours of discussions, decision-making, and hotel meals, we didn't just curate a journal, but cemented lasting friendships forged in common purpose and snarky humor. And for every

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PDF panic, we survived fueled only by lukewarm hotel coffee and, we emerged more resilient and connected.

In twelve years as *JOLE*'s Editor, it is clear that the role is less about personal accolades and more about committed stewardship. It's charting the ship's course, while also swabbing the deck and emptying the trash cans. It's a role that demands placing the *Journal*'s mission and its community first, consistently subjugating personal ambitions for the greater good of the profession. The editor is a custodian, ensuring that each publication upholds our standards of integrity, relevance and scholarly excellence. Making impartial decisions, fostering an inclusive platform for diverse voices, and navigating the complexities of academic publishing with transparency and fairness are an editor's primary obligations. The position is a testament to the values of service, responsibility and unwavering dedication to advancing the field of leadership education.

The primary mechanism of that advancement is ensuring the continued vitality and innovation in our discipline beginning with the fostering of emerging scholars. At the heart of the *Journal*'s mission lies development. We view *JOLE* not only as a gatekeeper of quality but as an incubator for new voices. By matching all authors with constructive reviewers, we underscore our commitment to being a space where individuals are valued and their contributions matter and are respected. This is not easy in a business predicated on judgements of scholarly "worth" that can often be sterile at best and dehumanizing at worst. After all, the stereotype of *Reviewer 2* exists for a reason. These efforts reflect *JOLE*'s ethos of development that inspires 175 leadership professionals from around the world to show up as reviewers year after year. And they do so while keeping our reviewers' response rate far under the average review time for scholarly, peer-reviewed publications. They really are the best in the business.

Nothing is so constant as change. The *Journal* I leave in the capable hands of my successor exists in a wildly different world than the one in which it existed when I took the reins 12 years ago. However, as academic and societal landscapes shifted, so did *JOLE*. Early in my term, we adopted online submission and review systems, added DOI numbers, refined—and re-refined—manuscript types. Our most recent and visible change – our partnership with Emerald Publishing – gives us access to powerful infrastructure and new audiences. With each shift we asked ourselves: How can *JOLE* meet this moment? We endeavored to operate in each new contemporary context with an unwavering dedication to making *JOLE* a place that advances the scholarship of leadership education, where rigor is balanced with the essential development of authors and reviewers who are the lifeblood of our field. And as *JOLE* has adapted to the shifting academic landscape, it has also embraced a deeper commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

True leadership education must reflect and serve the diverse communities it aims to impact. We pledged to make *JOLE* an outlet where every leadership educator feels welcome. Our diversity, equity and inclusion statement anchors measurable goals that guide content, author recruitment, reviewer development and readership outreach. We featured research and practice exploring leadership across different cultures, contexts and disciplines. We welcomed work centering marginalized voices and communities. The *Journal* has not shied away from issues of justice, liberation and emancipation, as they are inherently tied to the responsibility of leadership. The results speak for themselves: contributors and reviewers now span six continents, and readers download articles from more than 130 countries.

As I pass the torch, I am confident that *JOLE* will continue to thrive by embracing innovation and expanding its reach, ensuring that our commitment to nurturing emerging scholars remains steadfast amidst the evolving landscape of leadership education.

Teaching and learning continues to evolve. To capture the excellence of our colleagues, *JOLE* must continue to expand its digital presence through multimedia, interactive formats and broader open-access initiatives. The partnership with Emerald positions us to amplify the dialogue and to welcome allied disciplines to pull up a chair and join us in our work. But we must couple any embrace of technology with cultural relevance. And teaching practices, and

by extension its scholarship, must include the necessary trauma-informed practice to ensure our learning environments are safe, inclusive and supportive for all.

The full scope of our human interconnectedness and interdependence should be celebrated. Leader decisions made in Raleigh, North Carolina, have implications for people across the world, and our scholarship should reflect that. *JOLE* must continue to lead in facilitating the global discourse on the teaching and learning of leadership. Strategic partnerships with institutions and scholars worldwide can more fully enable leadership educators to address global challenges, while promoting cross-cultural and culturally relevant understanding of leadership education practices.

A rising tide raises all ships. As leadership challenges become increasingly complex, it is essential for *JOLE* to serve as a platform, where the diverse disciplines that contribute to leadership education converge. By encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration, the *Journal* can facilitate the integration of varied perspectives, methodologies and insights, enriching the discourse on leadership education. This approach not only broadens the scope of our scholarship but also encourages the kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration that dissolves professional silos. We must create allies to join us in navigating and addressing the pressing issues of our time.

While my aspirations for *JOLE* reflect a continued commitment to innovation, inclusion and global engagement, these goals are not confined to the *Journal* alone. They serve as a microcosm of the broader ambitions I hold for the discipline of leadership education as a whole. Aligning *JOLE*'s evolution with the field's growth, we ensure that our collective efforts contribute to a more dynamic, equitable and impactful discipline. The strides we make within *JOLE* can serve as a catalyst for transformative change throughout the entire landscape of leadership education.

Adaptation and evolution are necessary for survival and relevance. As educators, we must adapt to a world that shifts beneath our feet while helping learners see adaptability itself as a core leadership skill. We need to model resilience, practice flexibility and navigate ambiguity in real time—often shoulder-to-shoulder with our students as they translate theory into action. By deliberately cultivating critical thinking, emotional intelligence and ethical, compassion-centered decision-making, we give the next generation of leaders the tools they need to meet tomorrow's challenges with discernment and courage.

Leadership education cannot treat diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) as a choice or an academic exercise. DEI cannot be token representation, it must be an authentic driver of innovation and problem-solving. We have to get comfortable with our own discomfort and open ourselves to learn – and unlearn – the ideas that reinforce systemic inequality. We have to center DEI in every classroom, institution and professional association. Embedding culturally relevant and trauma-informed frameworks into curricula—and living those commitments in organizational practice—prepares leaders to confront systemic injustice and build inclusive communities that thrive.

Moral courage is not optional. Mission statements and good intentions are never enough. Relying solely on the established curricula and competencies of the last thirty years will not meet the challenges of the 21st century. If we believe education can shape an informed, compassionate society, we must root out inequity wherever it hides—syllabi, hiring practices, policy manuals—and name it. We must roll up our sleeves and get our damn hands dirty and push for change until it sticks. That work demands hard conversations with students, supervisors and peers; relentless advocacy for equitable policy and a willingness to quiet privileged voices so that those who have been forgotten or intentionally excluded can finally speak and be heard. Bravery must become our baseline.

We must anchor everything we teach in our shared humanity. More than twenty years ago, mentors told me that leadership education could change the world. I still believe them. Yet I often hear about disengaged students, cynical colleagues, and the ills of social media and artificial intelligence. I have joined in contributing to that noise—but complaining cannot mend the hurt. We already have the tools; it is our duty to use them. Leadership is never morally

or ethically neutral. Every skill or competency we teach leads to decisions that ripple outward to real people whose lives will reflect our learners' decisions. We must create experiences that reveal that connection, linking students to one another in ways that highlight every person's intrinsic worth. The competencies of empathy and compassion deserve equal billing with skills like decision-making and communication, and we must teach them as if lives depend on it—because they do. Our learners need to care about themselves, but more so, they need to care about others – including those from whom they are different. They have to care. We all have to care. More. Radically. We have to make it weird that we care so much.

As I reflect on the past twelve years serving as Editor, I am filled with profound gratitude for the journey this role has afforded me. The experiences have been enriching and transformative. The knowledge acquired, the opportunities embraced and the friendships forged have not only shaped my professional trajectory but have also deeply impacted me personally. I am thankful for the unwavering support and collaboration of colleagues, contributors and readers who have been integral to this incredible chapter of my life.

I now pass the baton, confident in *JOLE*'s future and excited to see the successes to come. I invite you—authors, reviewers, educators and students—to keep the *Journal* bold:

- (1) **Submit** work that stretches conventional thinking. Even when it makes you uncomfortable, especially when it makes you uncomfortable.
- (2) **Review** with empathy and exacting standards. They don't have to be mutually exclusive.
- (3) **Mentor** emerging scholars and reach back to help them up.
- (4) **Challenge** the norms and **EMPOWER** us to stay inclusive, global and courageous.

Together, we will ensure leadership education not only informs but transforms our collective human story.

Corresponding author

Jackie Bruce can be contacted at: jackie_bruce@ncsu.edu