Inviting Guest Speakers for Perspectives, Application, and Representation

Sara Spear

Rutgers University

My instructional context includes overseeing a year-long, interprofessional leadership development program for faculty administrators (e.g., vice deans, department chairs, program directors) from the eight schools that comprise our academic health center. In previous years, this program has been completely in-person, with representatives from the Center for Organizational Leadership serving as the primary instructors. Guest speakers, generally university senior leaders, were brought in for only a small handful of sessions. Their inclusion in the program meant we could emphasize real-world applications of the content and "bridge the academic-practitioner gap" (Merle & Craig, 2017, p. 41). Furthermore, the use of guest speakers highlights multiple backgrounds and perspectives, supporting the interprofessional element of the program and the constructive nature of a topic like leadership. As leadership is famously known for being defined in endless ways and without consensus, guest speakers build out the comprehensiveness of the topic by introducing other conceptions of what leadership is, how it is practiced, and its role at the organization.

As a multi-campus institution across the state, using guest speakers took significant amounts of coordination due to scheduling conflicts, time commitment, and travel requirements, which are common issues when engaging in-person guest speakers (Leor, 2015). Therefore, we used guest speakers on a limited basis pre-pandemic. For those that could attend a session, it was held in a traditional classroom space where they typically stood at the front and utilized a formal slide presentation they had prepared. After presenting, but considering the travel involved, they would often stay the entire session (two and a half hours). It was sometimes challenging to determine the most effective ways to engage them further because their presence changed the power dynamics of the group, potentially making some participants feel less comfortable in speaking as freely as they would without the guest present.

When the pandemic struck and everything transitioned to a remote format, we realized that the change could allow us to feature guest speakers more prominently and in more strategic ways. It widened the pool of possible guest speakers (Zou et al., 2019) opening it up to more diverse representation and providing broader opportunities for interaction with senior leaders. We have had the chancellor, provosts, vice chancellors, and all of the school deans participate in the program in a variety of ways. These guest speakers have reflected the "heterogeneity of settings, professions, perspectives, and activities that characterizes the field" (Glenwick & Chabot, 1991, p. 24) of academic leadership. Unfortunately, higher education and

academic healthcare leadership are not always representative of the institutional population, a gap that participants explored and examined throughout the program. Nevertheless, the guest speakers represented different backgrounds, disciplines, leadership roles, and mission areas, helping faculty participants broaden their understanding of the university, the landscape of academic healthcare, and potential leadership opportunities. The inclusion of experts in other areas also prompted us to modify the curriculum by adding new content in areas where we did not have expertise but were able to engage others who did.

In addition to *who* we could invite, we used the online format to explore *how* we would engage our guest speakers. As Lang (2008) found out firsthand, an invitation to a guest speaker is not enough; there needs to be a purposeful approach that aligns the speaker's contributions with the learning objectives. In working with a committee, we determined when and how to invite speakers based on their fit to the topic, session format, presenter's strengths, and their availability. For example, two guest speakers who are known to be engaging storytellers, were able to effectively use a formal presentation style for sharing their experiences of leading through crises. Another dean is particularly skilled at handling difficult conversations, so an informal conversation between her and the class was most appropriate, allowing her to model techniques and share lessons she has learned along the way. Other speakers, meanwhile, were best involved through formats such as question-and-answer and as panelists.

As senior leaders still have busy schedules and calendars that fill months in advance, the technology of remote learning offered convenience and flexibility that previously didn't exist. Rather than have a guest speaker attend a full session in-person, they could be involved with as little a commitment as twenty-five minutes. For one speaker who had a scheduling conflict, we were able to record an interview with them, capturing their thoughts and experiences on this topic, and we shared it with our fellows. This newfound online flexibility has allowed us to feature nearly twenty guest speakers across thirteen sessions. Involving multiple guest speakers from different backgrounds and roles allowed us to maintain the integrity of being an interprofessional program by showing leadership in a variety of contexts.

The inclusion of guest speakers has multiple instructional advantages, and programmatically it has showcased widespread support for leadership development and its value to the university community. We are fortunate that all of our guest speakers have expressed gratitude at being invited and a positive attitude about participating. This may be attributed to their service-oriented nature, the chancellor's visible support of the program, and the way that we make participating easy on the guest speaker. For example, providing guiding questions ahead of time is helpful when we anticipate the session topic may raise some difficult questions and the speaker might find it beneficial to prepare. By planning months in advance and sending appropriate communication that provides clear instructions and guidance, we aim to reduce the burden on our guest speakers and focus our attention on organizing an opportunity that can be rewarding for everyone involved.

Moving forward, we hope that we can continue to involve guest speakers regularly throughout the program. As we prepare for in-person classes and meetings, we have already learned that most participants and speakers prefer participating remotely due to the convenience and flexibility it offers. At the same time, leadership is a communicative practice and our programs emphasize interprofessional networking, a component that has its limitations in an online environment. We have begun exploring a hybrid format where in-person events could take place in video conferencing-equipped spaces where we can still feature guest speakers online. We have discovered there are few such spaces at the university that allow for such multimodal interaction and are also large enough to hold the entire cohort, and multi-campus events require a significant amount of labor and manpower. In order to effectively include guest speakers post-pandemic, we hope the university will develop spaces and processes that allow for hybrid solutions so we can maximize both in-person learning and videoconferencing technology.

References

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