

INGENIOUS LEADERSHIP

CREATING SOLUTIONS TO WICKED PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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EARLY REVIEWS

FOR *INGENIOUS LEADERSHIP*

“Melissa Morriss-Olson’s *Ingenious Leadership* offers fresh ideas from one of the leading optimists in higher education. This work brilliantly captures the essence of what it takes to lead with ingenuity in today’s complex academic landscape. Morriss-Olson’s exploration of how the most effective leaders cut through clutter to find focus, discern critical priorities, and balance scale with laser-focused clarity is particularly compelling. As someone deeply engaged with institutional challenges, I find this book’s roadmap for transformative leadership invaluable. It’s an essential read for those seeking to lead with ingenuity and intentionality in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education.” —ROBERT GRAY ATKINS, CEO, GRAY DECISION INTELLIGENCE, INC.

“Melissa Morriss-Olson’s *Ingenious Leadership* is an essential blueprint for higher education leaders navigating today’s complex landscape. Drawing from real-world experiences, this work highlights how innovative thinking and a relentless focus on student success can transform institutions. As a leader who has championed adaptability and data-driven decision-making, I find Morriss-Olson’s insights on fostering a culture of innovation particularly compelling.” —GARY BRAHM, CHANCELLOR EMERITUS, UMASS GLOBAL

“*Ingenious Leadership* offers a practical, refreshing and cleverly narrated view inside higher education leadership today. Melissa Morris-Olson captures the full experience of leading — not only the skills needed, but also, the mindset and the humanity. As someone who has championed equity and inclusion, I appreciate her focus on leveraging diverse perspectives and fostering a culture of belonging. This is an enjoyable read and a valuable resource for current and aspiring higher education leaders.” —DONNA CARROLL,

PRESIDENT EMERITA, DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY AND PRESIDENT,
ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

“Melissa Morriss-Olson’s *Ingenious Leadership* is a call to action for higher education leaders. It challenges us to be bold, embrace change, and lead with purpose in an era of unprecedented complexity. Through real-world examples of innovative leadership, this book inspires us to reimagine our institutions and empower our students. As someone who has navigated the evolving landscape of higher education as president for over a decade, I find this work not just timely, but transformative. It is an essential resource for leaders committed to shaping a bold, responsive future for higher education.” —BARBARA A. FARLEY, PRESIDENT, ILLINOIS COLLEGE

“Melissa Morriss-Olson’s *Ingenious Leadership* is a transformative guide for higher education leaders navigating today’s complex landscape. This work resonates deeply with my experience in system redesign, emphasizing the critical importance of adaptive leadership, design thinking, and effective execution in driving meaningful change. Morriss-Olson’s focus on leaders able to navigate uncertainty and see opportunities where others perceive barriers is particularly compelling. Her insights on cultivating resilience, fostering a culture of belonging, and leading with purpose are invaluable for anyone seeking to reimagine higher education for the 21st century. This book is an essential resource for leaders committed to innovative, mission-driven transformation in our sector.” —DANIEL GREENSTEIN, CHANCELLOR EMERITUS, PENNSYLVANIA’S STATE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, BAKER TILLY, HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTICE

“Higher education is going through unprecedented change, much of it with no playbook to follow. Leadership will require imagination,

courage, and fresh thinking. This book couldn't have come along at a better time. It is very much of the moment, though the lessons collected here can inform the work of years to come and inspire those navigating the unknown seas before us.” —PAUL LEBLANC, FORMER PRESIDENT, SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY AND CO-FOUNDER AND BOARD CHAIR, HUMAN SYSTEMS

“Recurring change and uncertainty create a new era of leadership in higher education. Melissa Morriss-Olson masterfully analyzes her unique and inspiring conversations with nearly a hundred leaders from many different types of institutions encountering many different challenges, who each personally share how the ever-changing landscape of higher education has transformed their leadership values, mindset, and strategies. A common set of attributes, qualities, and values emerge from her analysis which embodies the new leader for the new higher education. The book is timely and critical for higher education.” —STEPHEN LEHMKUHLE, CHANCELLOR EMERITUS, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ROCHESTER

“Melissa Morriss-Olson’s *Ingenious Leadership* is a vital contribution to our understanding of effective leadership in higher education. Drawing from real-world experiences of diverse leaders, this book offers invaluable insights into navigating the complex challenges facing our institutions today. As someone who has championed access and opportunity for underserved students, I particularly appreciate how this work emphasizes the importance of empathy, listening, and adaptability in leadership. This is an essential read for anyone committed to transforming lives through higher education.” —ELSA NÚÑEZ, PRESIDENT EMERITA, EASTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

“Few would argue that we face a crisis of leadership in higher education today. The sector is more volatile, uncertain, complex and

ambiguous than it has been in decades, and traditional approaches to leadership and problem-solving are inadequate to deal with today's challenges. No one is better able to advise both current and aspiring leaders on how to thrive in this environment than Melissa Morriss-Olson. *Ingenious Leadership* is a wise, practical, and indispensable guide." —DAVID J. STALEY, THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, AUTHOR OF *ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSITIES: SPECULATIVE DESIGN FOR INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION* AND *KNOWLEDGE TOWNS: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AS TALENT MAGNETS*

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Table

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the very core of higher education, not as an isolated shock but as an accelerator for change already underway. It was a clarion call to hasten the pace of adaptation in leadership—intensifying existing volatility and transforming long-simmering shifts into a rapid current of transformation. The urgency wasn't just *felt*; it was *lived*, propelling us to adapt swiftly or risk being outpaced. Rarely in the history of higher education has there been greater or more pressing need not only for rapid adaptation in how our institutions deliver education but also adaptation in how we lead our colleges and universities. How do we find models for such adaptation when the pressures on today's leadership are both unprecedented and unpredictable? As a first step, we need to look toward the visionaries who already exist among us and discover what can be learned not only from what they have achieved or how they achieved it, but from the daily *habits of mind* and *leadership practices* that have empowered them to approach new problems both creatively and courageously—and more than that, ingeniously.

I have long been fascinated with the visionaries of leadership, those rare trailblazers who view challenges as a canvas for innovation and see opportunities where others perceive dead ends. Their distinct leadership X-factor—a blend of foresight, creativity, and the courage to forge new paths—has always

intrigued me. My curiosity about what sets these leaders apart didn't just arise in the face of a global crisis; it has been a persistent pursuit of mine.

It was this intrigue that spurred the creation of the IngenioUs podcast, which I launched as the world grappled with the pandemic. The podcast was more than a platform for speaking with experienced individuals; it was a personal mission to delve into the minds of leaders who didn't just excel within the game—they were the game-changers themselves.

My very first guest, Dr. Carol Leary, then-President of Bay Path University, was on the brink of retirement after a transformative 25-year tenure. In our discussion, she exemplified leadership that didn't just respond to change but anticipated and leveraged it. Her mantra of transforming “What now?” into “What if?” encapsulated a mindset that seemed to ripple through her institution. Speaking with her, I realized that we were on the cusp of defining a radically different approach to leadership—one that the pressures of the pandemic had only made more vital.

Our conversation opened the IngenioUs podcast series and set the stage for what would soon become a deep dive into the world of ingenious leadership. Carol Leary's story, among nearly a hundred others, forms the backbone of this book, offering a fresh lens through which we can view the future of leadership in higher education—a future that calls for innovative, brave, and transformative approaches in the face of constant change.

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From my conversations, I learned that many leaders find themselves in environments that have become progressively taxing, both professionally and personally. Those leaders willing to be most honest admit feeling ill-prepared for the myriad of challenges they and their institutions are now facing. Is it any wonder that the national average tenure of college presidents is sharply decreasing, while the failure rate of executive searches (due to institutions re-initiating searches shortly after selecting a candidate) is on the rise?¹

Several themes emerged from my conversations; when taken together, these themes can help inform our understanding of the kind of leadership most needed in today's rapidly evolving environment. First, note what is *missing* from these conversations. None of the leaders talked about the importance of the kinds of technical expertise or other traditional contributions often found in presidential search profiles. Similarly, no one mentioned the value of an academic pedigree or of experience in the academy as a prerequisite for senior leadership success.

Instead, they mentioned things like adaptability and flexibility, vision, collaboration, emotional intelligence, grit and resiliency, and continuous learning—attributes that are not all commonly developed in the traditional senior academic professional trajectory. Our leaders also talked about how these skills are often interconnected, requiring them to apply

¹ See Josh Moody's article "Why Are So Many College Presidents Resigning?" in *Inside Higher Ed*, August 01, 2023. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/governance/executive-leadership/2023/08/01/abrupt-presidential-exits-underscore-jobs>

many at the same time according to the challenge or opportunity at hand.

The ability to effectively navigate what has been called the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment requires a different mindset *and* skillset than what might be adequate for institutions operating in a more stable and predictable setting. The purpose of this book is to provide a roadmap for current and aspiring higher education leaders, equipping them with the innovative tools and perspectives needed to thrive in an era of unprecedented change and to foster educational institutions that are not merely surviving, but flourishing. By showcasing real-life stories of visionary leaders who are navigating the VUCA environment with creativity, adaptability, and resilience, I hope to provide not just inspiration but also practical wisdom and skills.

For New and Seasoned Leaders Alike

This book is intended for a broad audience, from emerging leaders eager to make their mark to seasoned professionals seeking to adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape. Drawing upon the rich tapestry of experiences and wisdom garnered from our IngenioUs community conversations, this book serves as an indispensable blueprint for anyone in the leadership sphere who seeks actionable insights, illuminating

case studies, and transformative strategies tailored for these turbulent times.

For those who are at the outset of their leadership journey, these insights are particularly valuable. They offer not merely tactics but innovative strategies that will both elevate your leadership skills and broaden your vision of what's truly possible.

Moreover, this book is an essential companion for experienced leaders in higher education who recognize the need for a paradigm shift in their leadership approach to meet the unique challenges of today's world. Providing a comprehensive playbook for redefining higher education leadership, this resource equips you with a versatile set of practical tools and actionable strategies that are adaptable to your specific context and challenges. Whether you are a president, provost, vice-president, or dean, this playbook will enhance your capacity to navigate the complexities and uncertainties that define contemporary higher education settings.

In my discussions about this book's framework with seasoned leaders, a common sentiment emerged: "This is the book I wish I'd had when I stepped into my presidency, provost, or vice-presidential role." More than just a testimonial, such statements acknowledge that traditional pathways to higher education leadership often fall short in preparing leaders for the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) characterizing today's academic landscape. The world in which we now operate demands a new caliber of leadership—one armed with a skill set and mindset that are as versatile as

they are robust. This book seeks to fill that critical gap by presenting a blend of tried-and-true leadership philosophies coupled with innovative approaches. Through the inspiring stories and pioneering strategies shared here, this book aims to recalibrate the way we think about leadership in higher education, turning perceived challenges into catalysts for change and growth.

So, whether you're new to the world of higher education leadership or a seasoned professional, this book serves as your comprehensive guide to thriving in a world defined by constant change and complexity. Consider it not just a book, but a lifelong resource—a repository of wisdom that you can return to at various stages of your leadership journey, ensuring that you remain not just effective but truly ingenious in your role.

ACCOMPANYING RESOURCES

IngenioUs Leadership: Creating Solutions to Wicked Problems in Higher Education sets the stage, and the accompanying *IngenioUs Leadership Workbook* is where you get to act. This companion workbook is packed with practical worksheets, including the standout Ingenious Leadership Assessment Tool, which helps you take a good look at your leadership skills and see where you can grow. But it doesn't stop at just figuring out where you're at—it's all about building a custom game plan that zeroes in on your unique strengths and the areas you're ready to develop further. This workbook is your hands-on partner to the main book, turning those big ideas into real-world steps you can take to boost your leadership game where it counts the most.

The Transformative Role of Narratives

The crux of this book lies in the power of narratives. Having worked closely with doctoral students, I've witnessed the profound impact that storytelling has as a pedagogical tool for leadership development. What makes storytelling so impactful for grasping the nuances of leadership? It's a multifaceted approach that amplifies understanding and aids memory retention of leadership principles. Here are key reasons why I've chosen narratives as the central architecture for organizing this book.

To begin with, leadership transcends mere skill sets and techniques—it's equally about deciphering emotions, empathy, and the complexities of human behavior. As you immerse yourself in the stories shared here, you'll form an emotional bond with the leaders and their circumstances, which enriches your comprehension of leadership's complex nature.

Next, narratives offer a lived context where principles of leadership are not just discussed but are put to the test. Rather than absorbing abstract theories, you get to witness these principles in action within real-life scenarios. This deepens your appreciation for the hurdles leaders encounter and the judgment calls they're compelled to make.

Moreover, leadership frequently entails steering through convoluted and unclear situations. Narratives excel at

portraying these complexities, offering you vignettes laden with many variables and unforeseen developments, enabling you to better appreciate the nuances involved in leadership decision-making.

Additionally, many tenets of leadership are rooted in specific cultural narratives and traditions. The stories shared here encapsulate these cultural values, making the principles of leadership more relatable and contextually appropriate.

Lastly, compelling narratives have the power to inspire, encouraging us to aim for loftier heights in our own leadership journeys. Stories of real-life leaders overcoming obstacles and achieving remarkable feats can infuse you with a renewed sense of purpose and ambition.

By situating storytelling at the core of this book, my aim is to offer you a more dynamic, experiential approach to leadership learning. Through emotional engagement, situational context, and insights from the front lines of leadership, you'll acquire a more holistic and actionable understanding of what true leadership entails.

A Descriptive Methodology for Sense-Making

From the very first season of my podcast, IngenioUs, I was struck by the common themes and patterns that emerged from my interviews with leaders from different walks of life.

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While these were casual observations at first, the idea of collating these leadership insights into a more structured form took root, encouraged by colleagues who saw value in what I was uncovering. After four seasons, more than 100 interviews, and a deep dive into the interview transcripts, these ideas coalesced into a structured understanding of leadership.

To distill the leadership lessons embedded within these interviews, I conducted a systematic transcript analysis. This wasn't a cursory overview; I deeply engaged with the material, to get to the heart of each of the narratives. I examined these accounts from the vantage point of each leader, striving to understand their unique experiences. My methodological approach was descriptive in nature, purposefully selected to elicit rich, qualitative insights rather than surface-level summaries.

As I sifted through these transcripts, I noticed recurrent themes, ideas, and philosophies. It was as though each interview was a piece of a larger puzzle that, when assembled, formed a composite picture of what I came to define as "Ingenious Leadership." This concept enfolds a blend of innovative thought, adaptability in the face of challenges, and a form of leadership deeply rooted in empathetic understanding.

The insights did not emerge in a linear or forced way; they unfolded organically, revealing themselves as I delved deeper into each narrative. The beauty of this process was that it allowed the essence of Ingenious Leadership to emerge naturally, grounded in the lived experiences of the leaders I had the privilege of interviewing.

The book serves as a platform to showcase these fundamental tenets of Ingenious Leadership. My intent is not merely to impart knowledge but to stir emotional engagement with these principles. By presenting leadership lessons gleaned from real-life accounts, I seek to offer readers a comprehensive understanding of Ingenious Leadership. This understanding is not just intellectual—it's an experiential understanding that aims to equip readers with actionable insights, applicable in diverse leadership contexts.

This book is a culmination of years of careful listening, rigorous analysis, and deep reflection. It presents a unique and nuanced perspective on leadership, cultivated from the wisdom of leaders who have not just theorized about the tenets of effective leadership but have lived them.

For Those Who Question My Approach

For readers who might question the legitimacy of the “Ingenious Leadership” model because it's grounded in real-life experiences rather than empirical data, here are some things to consider.

First, not all valid research has to be quantitative or purely data driven. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and case studies, offer rich, contextual insights that numbers alone can't provide. My method offers a nuanced view of leadership that's rooted in the real world.

Next, the recurring themes that have emerged from my interviews across different leaders and contexts add a layer of reliability and validity to the findings. The consistency in themes speaks to common experiences and challenges leaders face, making the Ingenious Leadership theory more universally applicable.

Additionally, leadership doesn't occur in a vacuum; it's deeply embedded in personal experiences and social contexts. A theory based on real-life experiences is more likely to offer actionable insights that leaders can apply in their day-to-day work.

Importantly, the leaders I interviewed are experts in their respective fields. Their insights are valuable precisely because they come from a place of experience and expertise.

My approach allowed me to consider a variety of leadership styles and circumstances, providing a more holistic view of effective leadership than a more narrowly focused, data-driven study might allow. Leadership is not just about strategies and techniques; it's also about inspiring and motivating people. The storytelling aspect of my theory has the power to emotionally engage readers or listeners, offering a form of validation that goes beyond mere numbers.

Many well-respected theories in psychology, economics, and other fields began as observational studies or case studies before gaining broader empirical support. Theories often need to start somewhere, and real-world observations are a valid starting point. My work can serve as the foundation for more

extensive research. Future studies could take a more quantitative approach to test the principles outlined, giving the model even more legitimacy.

It's worth noting that no single model can capture the full complexity of something as multifaceted as leadership. However, if my concept of *Ingenious Leadership* resonates with people and provides actionable insights, it has real value—regardless of the method by which those insights were obtained.

Navigating this Book

In Part I of this book, we dig into the changing landscape of leadership within higher education. With the world around us in constant flux—thanks to demographic shifts, economic challenges, technological advances, and a host of other factors—there's no doubt that higher education is in the middle of its own revolution. If you're reading this, chances are you've felt that change and the urgency to adapt.

Chapter 1 sets the stage by explaining what the 'new normal' in higher education leadership looks like. You'll get a sense of the massive shifts and transformations that are forcing us to rethink the way leadership in higher education should work. From demographics and economics to technological innovations and the impact of COVID-19, we unpack why so many leaders are feeling overwhelmed. We'll also introduce you to the term 'Wicked Problems'—complex issues that can't

be solved with traditional methods—and explain why a new leadership paradigm is needed.

Chapter 2 shines a spotlight on the current leadership crisis. It will challenge your thinking by explaining why traditional approaches to leadership and problem-solving are inadequate for today's challenges. Here, we distinguish between 'Adaptive' and 'Technical' challenges, emphasizing that understanding this difference is crucial for effective leadership.

In Chapter 3 we will introduce the Ingenious Leadership Model. Derived from real-world insights and packed with actionable strategies, this chapter sets the groundwork for everything that follows. You'll learn about key elements that make a leader truly ingenious, from empowering others to stretching institutional capabilities.

In Part II, we delve into core common themes that define and distinguish transformative leaders in today's complex landscape. The emphasis here is not merely on skills and tactics but on deeply rooted principles and mindsets that enable individuals and organizations to thrive in uncertain times. Each chapter highlights a specific theme associated with Ingenious Leadership and includes a set of habits and practices that serve to illustrate how the theme is enacted.

Chapter 4, Unleashing Human Experience and Potential, centers on owning one's personal experience and value, highlighting the necessity of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and self-confidence. The chapter also explores

how the best leaders create an environment that values the strengths and experiences of others. Readers will understand the importance of self-awareness and emotional intelligence for leaders as well as how to create a culture of belonging by valuing the diversity of experience and strength.

In Chapter 5, *Answering the Call: A Journey of Purpose*, we explore the question ‘What propels a leader through challenging times?’ This chapter underscores the need for individual leaders to connect their own life’s purpose with the goals of their institutions. Readers learn how purpose can be used as a tool for inspiring others and driving innovation as well as how to align your personal mission with your institution’s objectives.

Chapter 6, *Innovation Unleashed: Beyond the Expected*, explores the concept of effectuation and the importance of adaptability in leadership. The focus is on making the best use of available resources and being open to opportunity. Readers will gain insights into adopting a “Pilot-in-the-Plane” worldview and will learn practical tips on how to be resourceful and make the best of what you have.

In Chapter 7, *Architects of Impact: Lead by Design*, the key idea is that effective leaders have a design-thinking mindset. From empathic perspectives to network building, the most successful leaders utilize many of the principles commonly associated with design thinking. Readers are introduced to strategies for adopting a constituent-centric orientation as well as how to think more holistically and systemically.

Chapter 8, Chaos Catalyst: Piloting Through Challenges and Opportunities, presents compelling arguments for embracing ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty as opportunities for growth and transformation. Readers learn how to get comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty while discovering the value of resilience and adaptability in chaotic times.

Finally, Chapter 9, Leader at the Helm: Navigating the Future, emphasizes the importance of strategic vision. From understanding the ‘big picture’ to storytelling, leaders learn to guide their organizations through uncharted waters. Readers will understand the importance of a clear vision and the ability to communicate it effectively and learn strategies for achieving needle-moving results and for evolving as a “learning organization.”

Each chapter features reflective questions at the end designed to help you assess your leadership style and capabilities, and worksheets that provide an opportunity to practice some of the skills discussed in the chapter. You may want to start your Ingenious Leadership journal by jotting down your insights as you work through these questions and worksheets. As the great educator, John Dewey, reminds us:

*“We do not learn from experience...
we learn from reflecting on experience.”*

– John Dewey, How We Think (1933)

Also, watch for the *Ingenious Gems* boxes peppered throughout each chapter, marked by this symbol:



These *Ingenious Gems* distill our leaders' stories into succinct lessons and takeaways.



You will also find QR codes like this one throughout Part II, appearing beside material from individual interviews with ingenious leaders in higher education. Use the QR code to go listen to that particular interview. The code appearing

here on this page simply directs you to the most recent episode (as of the time of writing) and to a table of contents for the *IngenioUs* podcast. You can also find a list of *all* the interviews referenced (with QR codes) beginning on page 567, as well as a curated list of “Recommended Resources” to further your understanding and skills, beginning on page 581.

Finally, the companion workbook, *Ingenious Leadership: A Workbook for Both Emerging and Seasoned Leaders*, serves as a practical toolkit to bring the theories and themes discussed in this book to life. Starting with “The Ingenious Leadership Assessment,” this one-of-a-kind tool helps you gauge where you stand as a leader and what areas may require further

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development. In the section “Worksheets for Leadership Mastery and Continuous Growth,” you’ll find more personal assessments as well as guided reflection questions—with space to record your answers—and exercises tailored to each Ingenious Leadership theme, enabling you to focus on those areas that you most want to develop further.

Order the book at

www.academicimpressions.com