ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE LEADERSHIP: UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS IN POLISH ACADEMIA*

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In each national higher education system, academic leadership requires a customised model tailored to address its unique local challenges, distinct from those encountered in other regions or fields, like business or civil society (Anthony & Antony 2017; Etzkowitz 2003; Cetin & Fayda Kinik 2015; Shaked 2021; Winston 2019). There are no universal academic models across sectors and countries. Therefore, we propose a framework specifically designed to tackle the particular problems and polarities inherent across all facets of academia: individual, organisational, and moral. Aligned with integral leadership paradigms (Forman & Ross 2013), our model encompasses the interconnected subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions of leadership, providing a comprehensive approach to navigating academic tensions (Küpers & Weibler 2008). Integral leadership, in essence, entails effectively managing and leveraging the unique paradoxes inherent at each level of the academic system (Friedman 2017; Heifetz et al. 2009; Northouse 2016; Putz & Raynor 2005; Williams 2005, 2015).

To elucidate the nature of leadership paradoxes, we turn to Barry Johnson's (1992, 2020; see Koestenbaum 2002) polarity management theory. The author delineates the fundamental distinction between problems that can be solved (choosing between A OR B) and polarities, which can only be managed (embracing BOTH A AND B). They assert that leadership entails navigating not just one polarity, but overlapping polarities, akin to wicked problems or multarities. Peter Koestenbaum (2002: 22, 104, 191) elaborates:

> Leadership always exists in conditions of ambiguity and polarization. In a sense, conflicts are never settled, for the resolution of one makes room for the appearance of others. […] The leadership mind understands and is fully adapted to the fact that the real world is ambiguous. The leadership mind is spacious enough to accommodate conflicting emotions and feelings, as well as contradictory concepts. Being comfortable with polarisation, paradox, and dialectical interactions – in the world, emotions, and ideas – is the hallmark of the spacious leadership mind.

What are polarities? Koestenbaum refers to them as paradoxes, contradictions, dialectical interactions, ambiguities. They can also be called uncertainties, dilemmas, difficult alternatives, recurrent, chronic tensions, dualities, contrasts, seemingly opposing forces, and dichotomies. Technically, Johnson (2020: 11) defines polarities as:

> interdependent pairs that need each other over time. They live in us and we live in them. They exist in every level of system from the inside of our brains to global issues. They are energy systems that we can leverage. They are unavoidable, unsolvable (in that you can't choose one pole as a sustainable solution), indestructible, and unstoppable.

In the long run, one pole of a polarity cannot exist without the other. Each pole of tension has its values, upsides, which stem from focusing on a given pole when combined with a relation to the other pole. Each pole also has its downsides, hidden fears, and shadows that appear when we focus on one pole to the neglect of the other, that is, when we replace BOTH/AND approach with EITHER/OR. The goal of polarity thinking is ultimately polarity management or polarity leveraging, creating a positive feedback loop that leverages polarities, allowing us to benefit from the advantages of both poles without being overwhelmed by their shadow.

/// Academic Polarities

The contemporary university is subject to many thus understood polarities: leadership AND management, spiritual mission AND material basis, strategy AND operations, self-interest AND self-giving, team AND individual, theory AND application, tradition AND progress, reason AND faith, discipline AND freedom, nationalism AND globalism (see Adair 2005; Lukianoff & Haidt 2018; Kennedy 2014; Parker & Crona 2012; Manderscheid & Harrower 2016). For most academics a fundamental polarity exists between academic management AND academic excellence. This tension arises because they must balance the demands of administrative duties with the pursuit of scholarship (Teelken 2012; Deem 2004). An important moment in becoming an academic leader is to become aware of these tensions and to seek creative interchange in their mutual complementarity, instead of focusing on of a given value to the neglect of the other. In the field of Polish academia, Andrzej K. Koźmiński is one such leader.

Koźmiński (R16), one of the 36 distinguished Polish academic leaders we interviewed, exemplifies the interplay between international engagement and impactful leadership within a national context.[1] Beyond his distinguished record of lecturing at leading universities in Europe and the USA, Koźmiński has demonstrably shaped the present and future of Polish academia. Kozminski University in Warsaw, the institution he founded, is a testament to his vision. The university has achieved international recognition, competing effectively with the best in the region, and its collaborators hold prominent positions within Polish academia. In his interview with our research team, Koźmiński stated:

> In academic environments, we have (and indeed should have) to deal with people with great ambitions, with great egos. And a big ego is very easy to offend, right? It can be offended even unintentionally. And this gives rise to conflicts of various kinds, fights, intrigues, which sometimes take on a caricatured, ridiculous image. And it's only funny [for] an outside observer. [...] In academic life, there are quite a lot of such "humorous" situations, especially if politics enters the university, research institute, or teaching. Well, then it's already a **cannibal feast**. Fortunately, no one eats anyone, murders are rare, but leading such a company is incredibly difficult. Incredibly difficult, especially if the sword of Damocles

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[1] The interview was published in *Forum Akademickie* (see Łuczewski 2024).

hangs over the person in the form of subsequent elections. […] In addition, […] people have ambitions that go beyond the university. […] They want to climb higher somewhere else. And this means that they are willing to sacrifice their university interests to these ambitions or simply do not have the time or inclination to deal with them. […] In our country, it looks like this: people generally do not want [to take on leadership positions]. Because the chance of realizing some kind of vision is tiny, and there is a lot of hassle involved, and it is very easy to expose oneself to some influential part of the environment. And then such a person is, so to speak, **pecked to death**. […] The chance of some success is small, and the risk is huge. […] If someone is stigmatized by some significant part of the environment, then "Forget about it." Therefore, it is difficult to find outstanding leaders in our country. […] Outstanding leadership in our conditions, in our higher education, happens very rarely. Because looking at all these conditions, it has no right to happen. But it happens sometimes. (Emphasis added)

We encounter a paradox here: a most prominent academic leader in Central and Eastern Europe acknowledging the near impossibility of academic leadership itself. With a touch of humour, Koźmiński adresses the following three key questions that define leadership in Polish academia:
- To be or not to be an academic leader?
- What are the key polarities in academic field a leader addresses and leverages?
- What is an academic leader for?

These three key questions are aligned with the three dimensions of the integral leadership model:
- Individual (the **WHO question**): Who constitutes a leader?
- Organisational (the **WHERE question**): Where does leadership take place? What is the scence of leadership?
- Moral (the **WHY question**): What goals and values does a leader pursue?

An integral model of leadership must encompass all three of these dimensions, that is, the **THREE Ws**. Let's delve deeper to understand how this integrated approach shapes effective leadership in academia.
- **WHO?** In Koźmiński's statement, this tension was a polarity between taking on a leadership role (to implement a vision and achieve common good) AND confining oneself to individual ca-

reer (to minimise the risks and difficulties involved in implementing one's vision). To be a leader, one has to risk the effort of realising their vision, including facing the "crucibles of leadership" (Bennis & Thomas 2002) and the possibility of being "pecked to death" (see Girard 1986).

- **WHERE?** Koźmiński shows that the academic field is a stage of drama. Here, academic leaders face a fundamental tension between stability AND change, individual AND team. If a leader turns out to be too directive towards realising their mission, they will expose themselves to ostracism. If in turn individualism prevails, there will be a war of all against all, and the group, instead of cultivating cooperation, will turn into a "cannibal feast" (see Girard 1986).

- **WHY?** What Koźmiński suggests is that participants in the academic field have different values and goals. This tension exists between extrinsic values (drawn from politics, business, civil society) AND intrinsic values (drawn from the traditional university). If an individual pursues their extra-mural ambitions, academic leadership will prove impossible.

This article aims to explore the complexities of these tensions by drawing on in-depth interviews with 36 outstanding Polish academic leaders. Based on the integral leadership model, our research team sought to understand the tensions these leaders experience at three different systemic levels. We aimed not only to grasp the realities faced by these leaders, but also to challenge their perspectives to uncover the hidden mechanisms at play within the university system.

/// Methodology

In selecting our sample, we used the typology of Dean Williams (2015: 9–31), which distinguishes three distinct phenomena: authority, power, and leadership. This typology partially overlaps with the distinction between formal leadership, that is, administrative-institutional leadership understood as fulfilling decision-making roles in university institutions or research teams, and competency-personal leadership, understood as the skills necessary to lead teams and institutions in the face of challenges. In constructing my sample, we were guided by the former criterion and invited people who held high institutional positions (past or future): rectors, directors, deans, heads of departments, and on the other hand – people

who belonged to the group of scientists managing the most prestigious grants and research projects, including ERC grants (see Hoening 2017).

We supplemented this formal criterion with two other criteria. First, we wanted to talk to people who have an impact on reality (power) and who are also respected by foreign scientific societies and hold positions at the best Western universities. Second, we intended to study people who, having formal authority and informal power, take leadership actions for the common good of the academy. We were close to Williams' intuition that "real leadership" lies in pointing out a problem, tension or a threat to encourage people to address them, even at the cost of causing group disorientation. In his view, leadership is a process of mobilising groups to face reality, solve difficult problems, and generate progress in creating knowledge, gaining experience, or institutional development. According to Williams, leadership should be courageous, but it does not have to be heroic. It is about partnership, strategic interventions, managing the learning process, the pace of work, and stimulating group problem-solving (Williams 2005: 246–256). According to this perspective, academic leadership can therefore be defined as a process aimed at fully realising the potential of the university and the people who create it.

By selecting the study group, we identified a unique group of leaders in which – we assumed – tensions related to leadership roles would be present in an extreme form (Bennett & Elman 2006: 455–476). Therefore, we focused on a group that experiences in a special way the "crucibles of leadership," which according to Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas (2002: 18) are responsible for forging true leaders. Being in a dual role: both leaders and followers, they were forced to deal with multi-level tensions, which we expect will be present to a lesser extent in other scientists.

The preliminary wave of the study (14 interviews) allowed us to prepare for the main part in 2023, when we conducted 22 interviews with academic leaders. Our study group had a significant limitation. Despite attempts to ensure a gender-balanced study sample, we reached 9 women. In their refusals to be interviewed, the respondents usually cited lack of time, family obligations, scientific obligations, or lack of compensation for participating in the research. In general, men seemed to us more willing to share their academic career history, which in itself indicates an important tension at the university. Our interviews showed that the issue of gender was an important topic and should be deepened in future research.

To complete the picture of academic leadership, we additionally conducted 10 interviews with international leadership experts, as well as 4 focus

group interviews (FGIs) with representatives of the Polish academic community. In preparing the scenario, we combined elements of in-depth interviews, biographical interviews and coaching interventions. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one and a half to three hours.

/// WHO? To Be OR not to Be a Leader?

The first challenge to the development of academic leadership in Poland is that there are few people in our universities who want to pursue a managerial career. And when they do start down this path, they encounter further obstacles. People may be reluctant to pursue a leadership career, as they must be prepared to give up their scientific career and lose prestige. As a result, it is a common phenomenon that key leadership positions are filled by people who have been somehow persuaded to do so, even though they sometimes had neither the desire, nor the skills, nor the predisposition. Let's give voice to one of our interviewees:

> The fundamental problem is that a large proportion of […] people gain some influence over management or decision-making, or even become deans or rectors, not because they have any management or leadership skills, but […] because they have achieved scientific success and thus gained prestige and recognition. Or perhaps they have some socially useful qualities […] that are needed in politics to win and convince. This in no way has to correlate with the ability to be a good leader, a good manager, a good dean or rector. (R4)

Our interviewee emphasises that working in scholar contexts does not translate into leadership and management skills at the university level. He describes the "leapfrog" nature of the leadership path and the lack of organic development from lower to higher positions:

> In Poland there is no culture of […] research groups, so a large proportion of professors first work very independently or with individual doctoral students, and then suddenly gain a management position that includes dozens or hundreds of people […]. They had no previous opportunity or experience in this area […]. So, they are suddenly thrown into the deep end and somehow make it work. (R4)

R4 described a leadership learning strategy that another interviewee called "trial by fire," a method that seems to be the most popular method of learning leadership: "Learning is through trial and error, there is no other way" (R2).

As the current process for selecting leaders overlooks the candidate's desire and preparedness for the role, this can lead to situations where individuals find themselves in leadership positions they never sought. Consider these two telling excerpts from our interviews: "I didn't want to be a director," one interviewee explains. "It works like this, someone has to be a director, and the one who is least assertive, but also has some competence, takes the job" (R11). Another interviewee reflects, "I am a leader who was a bit forced into it. It happened at a time when I didn't have such aspirations. The director […] suddenly resigned and offered me the position, before […] I could even think about whether I wanted it at all" (R8). Interviews revealed a tactic where reluctant candidates are pressured into vacant positions by threatening to assign an even less suitable person. While acknowledged as manipulative, this strategy seems common.

Unsurprisingly, such forced leadership often results in unprepared individuals struggling with administrative duties. One interviewee bluntly stated their dislike for these tasks, expressing the sentiment that "all scientific ideals seem to just burst and disappear" under the weight of administrative burdens (R3).

Why there's no desire among some of academics to become leaders? First and foremost they lack good leadership role models and programes that would encourage and prepare them to take on positions in the academic hierarchy and lead effective teams. In the absence of systematic, standardised preparation, leaders often describe their leadership as based on intuition: "In principle, my knowledge was totally intuitive, [combined with] a fairly insightful observation of different types of leadership at our Faculty" (R8). These intuitive approaches were not always present ("I didn't have," opined R29, "any role models"), but there were also outstanding examples:

> I didn't have this know-how about an academic career. The person who was incredibly important to me and is still incredibly important in this dimension […] is X. I think that thanks to her incredible intellectual-professorial-managerial formation, but also thanks to the fact that she willingly shares her experience […], she was an extremely valuable source of information. So, there was some important agent of influence here for me and that agent of influence was her. (R13)

Sometimes, the search for leadership intuition requires looking beyond academia. One academic leader admitted that he would be much less comfortable in this role if it were not for the help of his wife, who is an HR director in a private company and informally advises her husband:

> I think that if I didn't have my wife, who is really a soft skills person, who explains this to me regularly, I just wouldn't know. It wouldn't even cross my mind, because in the […] academic environment, this doesn't even come up as a topic. People are supposed to work effectively […], but how to do it? Most often this knowledge comes only from the one […] who was previously […] the boss. […] He managed in such a style, so I also manage in such a style. (R7)

Another paradoxical strategy is possible: doing things differently than the former leaders. Leadership practice is sometimes created on negation of a boss:

> I built my leadership model on the principle of negation. […] If the boss sometimes liked to put someone down, I would never do that. If he liked to exalt himself, I appreciate the people who are in my team. […]. If I had to write down 20 sentences that describe leadership, then probably 5–6 would be sentences taken from him, with already known opposites, and the remaining 15 from other sources. (R23)

These examples show that an accelerator of leadership is having an exceptional partnership with another person who will somehow complement the leader. A lonely leader is not able to fully utilise their potential, and it can also be stated with great certainty that they will not be able to overcome certain difficulties that they will encounter. Having a confidant who will accept the leader with their weaknesses as well and help them find their true, life-giving leadership identity is invaluable support for the demanding practice of leadership.

/// WHERE? Stability AND Change, Individual AND Team

In our interviews our interlocutors felt that their universities were choosing the value of stability over change. There was a paradox here, as there

was widespread complaint about the changes caused by successive reforms imposed by the Ministry of Science, but this did not mean real reforms of the universities themselves, but rather adaptation to external criteria and doing things the way they had been done before. No reforms have changed the organisational culture existing in some of the leading Polish universities: "People come to meetings, for example, without a meeting plan. Or they don't know what is supposed to come out of it. Nobody takes notes from the meeting. Really a lot of bad practices" (R14).

On the campuses, respondents do not see programmes that would change the negative state of affairs:

> We are proud of our achievements and […] we show them to our community, hoping that they will motivate others. However, we have relatively few, or rather zero, so-called "career development" programs, that is, programs that are supposed to help people achieve these successes, not just reward them once they have them. (R27)

In the same spirit, an internationally acclaimed scholar criticised the organisational culture of his university:

> We've been stuck on this track since the 1950s. […] It feels like those who aren't powerful enough lack the resources or influence to push for change. […] I've spoken with colleagues, and we all agree we need someone to come in and manage us more effectively. […] Hiring a consultant with expertise wouldn't be a big expense (around 10,000 zlotys) and could really help streamline our processes. […] Unfortunately, there seems to be a general resistance to addressing these issues. (R7)

Another strong tension we discovered at organisational level was the polarity between individual AND team. In the discussion about structural problems in the academic environment, R16 paid attention to the dominant attitude towards individual success:

> The contemporary game of success in the academic environment is not a team game, but an individual one. People strive to achieve high ratings for their publications, entering into such temporary alliances, various co-authorships, but these are not long-lasting relationships. (R16)

At times, being in a team might be treated as an obstacle for an individual career: "It's not worth investing in becoming a leader, because I prefer to do it myself, because I'm responsible for it, […] if I do it with someone, […] it's they who will delay everything, there will be difficulties" (R8). In such a situation, the simplest solution dominates: a strong desire to separate oneself from teams out of fear of being exploited genius:

> There are those who simply consider themselves geniuses, who do everything in the corner, do not integrate with the team and the group, believe that they have some super discovery and that if they say something about it, the discovery will be stolen from them. (R2)

Leadership activity would then address and leverage the tension between individual and team.

/// WHY? Excellence AND Relations

In the face of the disintegration of the traditional ethos of the university, with its intrinsic values of goodness, beauty, truth, selflessness, responsibility and freedom (Bloom 2008; Readings 1997; Rembierz 2019), contemporary academia increasingly refers to external values (Jemielniak & Greenwood 2016; Kwiek 2016) drawn from business (such as productivity and quality; Giza 2019, 2021: 164–166) or civil society (such as diversity, equity, inclusion; Dewidar et al. 2022). This creates a polarity within extrinsic values in relation to the traditional university, namely between excellence (drawn from business) AND relations (drawn from the NGO sector). One of our interviewees observed the negative consequences of prioritising scientific production at the expense of relationships:

> Researchers are evaluated according to one criterion only: publish a lot and high-impact. A lot and high-impact! That's it, you're a star, you get money, and everything is fine, and everything else is less important. […] The most important thing is that you have three publications, and then you write a grant, and it'll be okay. And the fact that it causes depression in the process, well… […] I've been to places where everyone was closed off because HR wasn't working. And so what comes out is a cult of work, everyone was overworked and didn't talk to each other. It ends badly. Productivity definitely drops. (R7)

Our respondent noted that the pursuit of productivity without building relationships with others leads first to depression (because relationships were neglected), and then immediately to a decline in productivity, which we wanted to devote ourselves entirely to. The inadequacy of such a leadership model becomes particularly evident in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teams with more evenly distributed leadership competencies fared better. This contributed to better decision-making (multiple perspectives), increased engagement of team members, and did not require micromanagement (especially difficult in a situation of physical separation; Fernandez & Shaw 2020: 43). The overreliance on academic metrics like publications and citations can hinder effective leadership. As another interviewee highlighted, "Sometimes bibliometrically it's great that someone has good contact, and then it turns out in practice that nothing happens" (R2).

Conversely, as a response to the absence of substantial relationships, another prominent global trend is the increasing focus on inclusion (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018). Michael D. Kennedy, an academic leader with considerable experience in authoritative roles, currently serves at Brown University. During our FGI session, he referenced diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, highlighting Brown's objective of integrating scientific excellence with inclusivity. This underscores a concerted effort to address societal disparities while fostering academic advancement:

> It requires understanding a lot more than any project administrator ever could about what each person brings, and then supporting and respecting that. All of this comes together for me in a kind of polarity. […] When at Brown we fight about how to increase diversity, one of the things people say is that diversity is one thing, excellence is another, but it's that kind of thinking that leads to polarization. It's a question of how to manage tensions. We've managed to do that. The best way to deal with it is to find people who expand the university's inclusion mechanism while also having unquestionable academic achievements. […] It was the result of real collaboration at all levels of the university to increase our diversity while meeting the standards of excellence. Not everyone was happy with this process, but now everyone is happy with the result. We have gained enormous respect from the higher administration of our university and the rest of the American Sociological Association. This is a dramatic change. We have difficulty acknowledging difference and diversity on our universities, which I suspect are

greater than in Poland, but I think they have their analogies in your country. So we are trying to find a language that expresses respect, even if we disagree. (Łuczewski et al. 2021: 275–277)

In our sample, Polish senior leaders didn't discuss DEI policies. However, there was a prominent focus on one aspect of inclusion: gender. One of our interviewees, a distinguished scholar and head of a school at a natural sciences university, highlighted the competitive atmosphere among women in her faculty. She pointed out the pressure on women to achieve a PhD within two years and defend it within three: "It all happened in a shorter time frame than I thought […] I had to be better […]. If you look at academic careers, in the case of women it often means sacrificing themselves for work. They have no family."

Another respondent, an economist and head of programmes at her university, echoed this sentiment, underscoring the prevalent gender inequality rooted in deep-seated cultural beliefs:

> My boss was a professor. It regularly happened that after the seminars, he would say to another guy "you have such nice girls in your department." […] I know that my basic salary is lower than that of my colleagues in the department and they do almost nothing, as I raised funds for them. And one of the professors said that my husband earned so well. […] Women are much more manly than men, the men here are mostly about gossips, a lot of noise, PR, chatterboxes who can't get to the point. […] Oh, sometimes I want to say during a meeting, let's be manly, let's put emotions aside, they are not decisive at all, I am a task-oriented person, you can't talk to these guys. This is my experience.

Without clarity about the goals and values of academic leadership in Poland, institutions will encounter significant challenges and become mired in the dichotomy between excellence AND relations. In the absence of well-defined values and goals, universities will face intense conflict and polarisations.

/// The Future of Academic Leadership

Our research reveals the three fundamental challenges facing Polish academia, rendering effective academic leadership nearly impossible. First,

there is ambiguity surrounding the values that universities should prioritise, with tension existing between intrinsic AND extrinsic values, as well as polarisation within extrinsic values regarding excellence AND relations, including excellence AND inclusion. Second, there is a polarisation within the leadership environment, with universities prioritising stability and individualism over change and team. Thirdly, at the level of individual leaders, there is a polarisation between being AND not being a leader. Polish academics are often ill-equipped and reluctant to assume leadership roles, lacking necessary role models and support programmes.

What is the future of academic leadership? The emphasis on productivity leads to a heightened need for academic leadership (Etzkowitz 2003: 111). Still, in our conversations, academics mention the lack of recognition among academics for leadership expertise. Many of them, including formal leaders and heads of department, are not convinced that this is sound knowledge. One of our interviewees articulated bluntly the dominant opinion in his hard-scientific millieu: "A book which says how to manage people? That's nonsense, that's humanistic stuff! […] Why should I read that!? I might as well just listen to my colleague and that's enough" (R7). Knowledge about stress management, team building, and maintaining work–life balance is then considered secondary. However, underestimating the value of leadership expertise that can inform decision-making has further negative consequences in addressing structural challenges.

Another obstacle is the belief in the superiority of the academic world over the leadership field in general:

> People don't accept that someone can be a facilitator on a training course and may not have a doctorate, may even know much less, but understands the process and therefore can lead the process with a better result than someone who doesn't. This is knowledge that seems to me to be completely basic. […] But it is often obvious that people with high titles think they know everything about it. (R14)

Anna Giza-Poleszczuk stated during the FGI that even she, with her position as Vice-Rector of the University of Warsaw, was unable to change this attitude:

> For me, the key issue is the problem of connecting the heart with the mind. I have the impression that scientists are terrified of not using their reason and being guided by some kind of feeling. I mean

that every time I tried to do something like a workshop with sticky notes, they were so terrified that they would say something like: "No, no, no, no, just ask questions and we'll answer. We don't think we have a subconscious, we don't have feelings, we don't have emotions, we have this big, big brain, we're 100% conscious of everything and don't even try to use psychological manipulation to get something out of us!" (Łuczewski et al. 2021: 269)

In consequence, none of the respondents participated in a comprehensive, advanced academic leadership development programme on behalf of the university. Participation in management courses and trainings was rare. On the other hand, the respondents articulated their growing need for preparation for leadership roles. An example of such conscious development was the rector of one of the universities. But even in the highest leadership positions at the university, she did not have time for systematic development: "I've been here for 10 years, because we don't have rector's term limits, […] so I simply didn't have time to go to management school, but I did take a series of different trainings" (R26).

Our research suggests an increasing need for integral leadership that considers the polarities in all dimensions of leadership: individual, organisational, and moral. By embracing integral leadership perspective, academics can develop the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively navigate the challenges and opportunities of Polish higher education. In this type of leadership, the key is the ability to recognise and be present amidst polarities and polarisations, while also being able to manage and transform them into creative tensions. As Koestenbaum (2002: 191) reflects: "The leadership strategies are instruments of an orchestra, playing different melodies to create one symphony." The stakes of academic leadership are thus high. Universities can either resemble "cannibalistic feasts" or "symphonic orchestras." The future of any given university hinges on how these tensions are effectively managed. The first casualties of a lack of reflection regarding academic leadership are the leaders themselves.

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/// Abstract

Dominant leadership models, derived from business or politics, fail to address the unique nature of academia. This article proposes the integral leadership model, tailored to the specific challenges of universities, particularly in the Polish context. Drawing on data from 36 in-depth interviews and polarity management theory (Johnson, Koestenbaum), the article argues that inherent tensions (polarities) at every level of the academic system are a key factor in understanding leadership complexities. Unlike problems requiring a single solution (A OR B), polarities necessitate managing seemingly opposing elements (A AND B) for long-term effectiveness. This framework sheds light on the challenges faced by academic leadership in Poland across three dimensions: individual, organisational, and moral. Individual challenges include a lack of aspiring leaders and inadequate role models. Organisational challenges stem from prioritising stability over change and individual over team. Moral challenges arise from a lack of clarity about leadership goals and values, resulting in conflicts between excellence and relations (inclusion). The article emphasises the growing need for integral leadership that acknowledges and manages these particular polarities.

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