One of the best books on how to be an academic leader actually has nothing to do with higher education administration. Daniel Levin’s *The Zen Book* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2005) is a combination of introduction to Buddhist practice and guide to daily life. It is also a wonderful summary of principles that are useful to any academic leader. Consider the following.

Be thankful for anyone in your life who’s a problem. They’re your teachers, for they show you where you truly stand. A great saint once said to a disciple who came to him complaining about someone else: “He is your greatest blessing. In fact, if he were not here, it would behoove us to go out and find one like him.” Levin (2005) 34.

We sometimes are frustrated with people who just don’t seem to “get it” or who have personality traits that seem to make our work harder. When we deal with people like this, we actually have a choice: We can either give in to our frustration (thus making the whole situation a negative experience), or we can try to discover why it is that the “problem people” where we work annoy and disturb us so (thus making the whole situation a learning experience). The worst administrator I ever worked for caused me endless aggravation until I suddenly learned how much I was learning from him: No one else, before or since, ever taught me so much about how not to run a college.

“Do things in a way that makes others feel that they did them. In this way, everything will get accomplished.” Levin (2005) 124.

Most of the successes experienced by faculty members are *personal* successes. It is usually one particular person who got a book published, serves as principal investigator on a grant, wins an award for outstanding teaching, or makes the contact that opens a door for a brilliant student. On the other hand, most of the successes experienced by administrators are *group* successes. Even if it was our decision to review the general education program, it is almost always a committee that develops and implements the proposal. Even if we did most of the negotiations that brought in a major gift, it frequently takes a team to make the most of the new funding the institution has received. For this reason, the sooner we as administrators begin finding our success in the success of others (even if they could not have achieved anything without us), the better we will serve our institutions.

“Walk gently, leaving tracks only where they can make a difference. Where no difference can be made, walk without leaving tracks. This is how the sage passes through life: unseen and invisible, yet effecting change everywhere.” Levin (2005) 134.
Truly effective administrators learn to pick their battles. Not every cause has to be a fight to the death. In fact, not every issue is even worth having a strong opinion about; many situations in higher education will work out roughly the same no matter which course of action the institution chooses. So, be sure that you take a stand where it really matters. Strong leaders are not necessarily the people with the loudest voices; they’re the individuals with the most compelling vision. And part of a compelling vision comes from your ability to incorporate the ideas and hopes of others into your area’s overall plan. The goal, therefore, is to “lead by not leading.” In other words, rather than continually striving to make your voice heard and to impose your ideas on others, be a catalyst for improvement by creating an environment where everyone’s contributions are welcome and respected.

“Succeed quietly, letting everyone else believe that it was because of their efforts that a venture worked. At times, you may feel unrewarded for your efforts, but you’ll always know in your heart the value of your contributions.” Levin (2005) 147.

As we saw earlier, administrators achieve their greatest success through the achievements of others. Even beyond this, however, many of the choices made by an administrator go unnoticed because they do not have the immediate prestige of a book that is published or a grant that is received. Many of an administrator’s accomplishments cannot even be measured or quantified by customary methods of assessment. The most satisfied academic leaders are, therefore, the ones who do not rely on the constant recognition of others in order to achieve their sense of worth. They know the contributions they have made, and many times that knowledge is enough.

“When no one is doing what you think is right, do it yourself.” Levin (2005) 163.

Good administrators lead by example. They also do what’s in the best interests of their institution, not because these actions are popular or even necessarily noticeable, but because that’s what they were hired to do. It can be difficult (and extremely lonely) being the person who says “no” when it is necessary for the sake of the budget. Making a decision in order to achieve a long-range goal at the expense of a less-important, immediate pleasure can be extremely isolating. But it is these situations that really prove the merit of the best academic leaders.

“When you walk, walk; when you eat, eat; and when you sit, sit. This is the way of Zen. Do what you do fully in each moment.” Levin (2005) 178.

Multitasking has been elevated to the status of a modern virtue, but it is much overrated. In most cases, when we say we’re multitasking, we’re really giving each activity only a fragment of the attention it deserves. As a result, we end up being careless rather than more productive. Good administrators are usually “sequential taskers” rather than multitaskers: They give each project their whole attention; and
when it is time to set it aside and move on to the next responsibility in sequence, they give the new project their full and undivided attention. If we continue to fixate on decisions that have already been made or work that is already completed, we end up getting nothing done. If fact, we act as though nothing is ever “done” since we keep reopening closed decisions and allowing them to distract us from our other duties.

“When we are with people, be 100 percent with them; when we’re by ourselves, be 100 percent alone. This is the way of all things: Be exactly where we are at any given moment and everything will be without strain.” Levin (2005) 197.

If multitasking is inadvisable when we are dealing with projects, it’s unforgivable when we’re dealing with people. No one wants to feel that they are receiving only a fragment of an administrator’s attention. Many people have said that one of the most remarkable things about being in the presence of Jacqueline Kennedy or Bill Clinton is that, while you were speaking with them, they made you believe you were the most important person in the world to them. Good administrators proceed in the same way. When they are meeting with a faculty member, student, parent, board member, or other member of the institutional community, they give that person their complete and undivided attention. Often they will even give the other person the time that he or she needs, not simply the time that is available. By so doing, they may not achieve “enlightenment,” but they come to be regarded as truly enlightened academic leaders.