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When leadership is lived, not administered, institutions begin to heal and humans begin to flourish.

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The living mentor

Higher education institutions today are judged not only by their rankings or research output, but increasingly by how well they nurture the human potential within their gates.

In recent years, even India's premier campuses—long celebrated for academic excellence—have witnessed a troubling rise in student suicides and mental health emergencies like, repetitive anxiety, depression, self-harm, panic attacks, hallucinations, severe insomnia, etc. Each such loss or mental breakdown reminds us that formal grievance mechanisms or counselling cells, though essential, cannot substitute for genuine human connection.

What institutions need now is a new kind of leadership—managerial yet humane, structured yet social. This is the premise of what we call the living chief people officer in management language, or simply the living mentor in spirit—a reimagined role that blends strategy with sensitivity and embeds wellbeing, belonging, and growth into the rhythm of campus life.

Why a new role?

Academic management has long drawn from corporate and bureaucratic hierarchies: deans, registrars, and other administrative heads, each with defined silos of authority. The dean of student affairs, for instance, is burdened with duties that leave little time for informal engagement with stakeholders—students. Yet, contemporary campus life demands something more porous and people-centred. Several converging realities make this change urgent:

Campuses as micro-societies: Students, faculty, and staff each face distinct pressures—academic, emotional, and financial. Students arrive with varied expectations, and vulnerabilities, and generally are from highly diverse cultures, ethos and backgrounds; fragmented systems often respond to crises instead of preventing them.

Expanding success metrics: Beyond placements and publications, institutions are now judged by wellbeing, retention, and student experience—across the world, even as part of the metrics in designated formal ranking systems.

Leadership vacuum: Many campuses lack visible yet approachable figures who connect

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organically with students. Without relational leadership, even well-crafted policies fall short.

The living mentor, being envisaged by the author, is the bridge between systems and souls—someone who converts empathy into operational practice.

When an idea meets resistance

When I first discussed this concept informally with one of my brightest PhD mentees—a sharp, fearless thinker—she smiled and called it "just another title, maybe even a work of fiction." Her reaction, though disarming, was honest. It reflected the fatigue among young scholars who see new designations as more hierarchy than help.

That response reaffirmed the deeper challenge: unless leadership feels alive, visible, and human, even the noblest frameworks risk being dismissed as another bureaucratic layer. I replied to this wonderful mentee with beautiful soul: "The Living Mentor, therefore, is not about nomenclature—it is about presence, trust, and continuity in human engagement".

Who's the living mentor?

The living mentor is not a cosmetic retitle of existing roles. Ideally, this person brings an external perspective to academia while understanding its internal culture—someone capable of influencing systems, people, and well-being outcomes. Three attributes define this role:

1. **Presence before crisis:** The living mentor cultivates everyday engagement—sharing meals, joining walks, sitting through rehearsals—so that trust precedes intervention.
2. **Boundary spanning:** Positioned across hierarchies, he connects to students, faculty, support staff, and administrators, fostering collaboration rather than compliance.
3. **Operational accountability:** Beyond goodwill, they have the authority and resources to make things happen—budgets, metrics, and measurable outcomes.

This fusion of empathy and structure differentiates the living mentor from welfare offices or counsellors. It is leadership by being there.

The managerial logic behind it

From a management perspective, the living mentor addresses three chronic challenges cum persistent inefficiencies in institutional life ecosystem:

- **Information asymmetry:** Early signals of stress or conflict often go unnoticed when leadership is distant. Everyday presence surfaces them early.
- **Siloed responses:** Separate departments duplicate effort or deflect responsibility. A cross-functional leader aligns incentives and ensures coordinated response.
- **Reactive culture:** Most institutions respond to crises; few build preventive systems. The Living Mentor reverses that equation.

Viewed through organisational theory—agency, coordination, and culture—the role reduces transaction costs in human systems and enhances institutional resilience.

What the role looks like in practice

The living mentor's daily rhythm is both ordinary and transformative. He might join students on a morning cycle, walk with colleagues across the campus, or share a quiet hour of yoga at dawn with a few early risers. He is rather expected to share lunch with faculty, join them at 'chai-coffee hubs', attend a play rehearsal, and end the day in a quiet chat with hostel residents as well as wardens. These are not symbolic gestures—they are the architecture of trust.

By humanising leadership through shared routines, the living mentor fosters an atmosphere where connection replaces hierarchy, and preventive care replaces damage control. A conversation during a walk often achieves more than a formal meeting in a boardroom.

I. Core responsibilities

- Routine, visible presence across campus.
- Convening a cross-functional wellbeing council.
- Designing a three-year wellbeing and retention strategy.
- Managing a small discretionary fund for immediate support.
- Reporting quarterly on engagement and wellbeing metrics.

II. Skills and profile

- Emotional intelligence and credibility across all campus groups.
- Background in leadership, counselling, and systems management.
- Ability to engage without being performative.

Measuring what matters

Empathy must coexist with evidence. Possible indicators include:

- **Engagement index:** Frequency and quality of informal interactions
- **Time-to-support:** Response time from concern to resolution
- **Retention:** Year-on-year student and staff continuation
- **Incident reduction:** Fewer serious escalations

Make in India aimed to encourage both domestic and international companies to set up manufacturing operations within the country, while also attracting large-scale investments into the sector

- **Perception surveys:** Levels of trust in campus leadership

Metrics like these not only validate impact but also institutionalise accountability.

Implementation pathway

Piloting allows flexibility, learning, and adaptation before formal adoption. Institutions may start small to ensure smooth and organic induction:

1. **Pilot a 12–18-month program:** Assign a leader with a clear mandate.
2. **Create a wellbeing fund:** Empower swift, human-centric responses.
3. **Institutionalise informal interactions:** Weekly open hours, monthly town halls.
4. **Cross-functional coordination:** Integrate registrars, counsellors, and student leaders.
5. **Review and scale:** Use measurable outcomes to justify continuity.

Risks and mitigation

Two main risks loom large: tokenism (a mentor in title but not in authority) and burnout (expecting one person to fix systemic issues). Mitigation include the following CPO specific empowering strategies:

Authority and resourcing: Ensure the role has budgetary autonomy and a small staffed team.

Distributed leadership: Build capability across faculty and staff rather hoarding onus.

Clear boundaries: Define escalation pathways—by clinical services and legal counsel.

Done well, the Living Mentor catalyses system-level change; done poorly, it can generate cynicism. Institutions must invest in this role—not as a formality, but as a cultural necessity. For its only when students see someone living fully, that they believe they can too.

Beyond academia: A broader lesson

The idea extends beyond campuses. Corporates, hospitals, and government institutions face similar challenges—burnout, disengagement, isolation. Investing in visible, human-centric leadership is no longer a soft skill; it's a strategic necessity. For universities, however, this carries moral gravity. Educational spaces are meant to build not just professionals but human beings. When leadership is lived, not administered, it transforms both.

From title to trust

Ultimately, the Living Mentor is less a position than a presence—a quiet revolution in how institutions care. Such leadership doesn't operate within the system; it becomes the culture—not a crisis responder, but a culture transformer.

In an era where intellectual achievement cannot be separated from emotional wellbeing, the Living Mentor is not a luxury but a necessity: a quiet revolution in how institutions care, connect, and create the conditions for their people to flourish.

Students trust him not because of the badge he wears but because he is one of them, yet a couple of years or decades wiser—a human compass they can turn to. He builds relationships before crises happen, and transforms every casual encounter into a moment of connection.

To faculty, he is a mirror of empathy, understanding the pressures of pedagogy and research, offering quiet leadership through emotional intelligence and example.

To parents, he is reassurance incarnate—a presence that tells them, "Your child is not alone."

If academia learns to treat connection as a discipline, not an afterthought, it can turn its most intangible quality—trust—into its greatest strength. The choice is clear: either humanise leadership now, or risk losing the humanity we claim to nurture. IM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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