Successful institutions are often the products of many hands pulling together in the same direction. And so it has been with the Harvard Center for Public Leadership (CPL), an institution built over decades by people with fierce dedication to the common good.

Its beginning traces all the way back to 1936 and the Great Depression when the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) itself was founded. The School had two stated missions: to make the world a better place through public policy research informed by engagement with practitioners; and to prepare outstanding students for lives of service and public leadership.

For much of its early history, the School built a reputation as America's premier public policy school and a pioneer in the teaching of public management. Legendary faculty like Richard Neustadt and Thomas Schelling walked its halls. But in those years the School, like most academic institutions around the world, offered few, if any, courses in leadership itself.

Laying The Foundation

In 1983, Ron Heifetz, a physician, pioneer in leadership education, and now the King Hussein bin Talal Senior Lecturer in Public Leadership, approached Dean Graham Allison to propose that the School develop a strong teaching and research program on the practice of leadership. In Heifetz’s view, the twentieth century showcased both the blessings of wise leadership and the devastating impact of charismatic figures who prey upon the pains of their people. The coming century would need our graduates to know more than how to analyze policy and run institutions; they also would need to know how to lead peoples across the globe in facing the challenges of teeming societies in an interdependent world. Dean Allison endorsed Heifetz’s proposal and asked him to prepare the new curriculum.

Over the next seventeen years, Heifetz collaborated with colleagues and partners (see Box) to lay three essential footings – intellectual, curricular, and institutional – for what would become the Center for Public Leadership at HKS. Heifetz set in motion streams of work that brought together faculty from across the University to refine the School’s conceptual frameworks for leadership, share teaching innovations, mark out important areas for research, and identify gaps in the leadership curriculum.

In these generative years, books were written, new courses were offered, and a community of leadership faculty took form. Projects focused on leadership were seeded at Harvard’s graduate schools of business, education, medicine, public health, design, divinity, and law, as well as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.
As proof of concept, the new courses by Heifetz and others quickly became the most popular at the Kennedy School. Alumni consistently voted them the most influential of their School experience. The analytical framework and experiential teaching methods allowed students to learn from their own leadership cases and discover new options for managing themselves, analyzing situations, and taking action. The curriculum strengthened a wide array of diagnostic and strategic skills, as well as the matters of heart, spirit, and character essential to the practice of leadership.

Toward century’s end, Heifetz sought to lay the fourth and final footing of CPL’s foundation. In collaboration with his longtime mentor and the School’s Dean, Joseph Nye, Heifetz sought the financial support of the visionary philanthropists Leslie and Abigail Wexner, who seized with great enthusiasm upon the idea of establishing a new Center on the arts and practice of public leadership.

Growing Years

During discussions with the Wexners, Dean Nye invited a new member of the Kennedy School faculty, David Gergen, to serve as co-director with Heifetz. Just as Heifetz laid the academic and institutional foundation, Gergen – a White House adviser to four presidents of both parties and an admired political analyst – fortified the practitioner wing and grew that foundation into a flourishing research center.

The Center officially opened its doors in 2000, and for the next two years Heifetz and Gergen worked together to build a strong organizational structure that would propel CPL into the future. In 2002, Gergen took over as sole faculty director and Heifetz returned to teaching, writing, and mentoring new members of the leadership faculty.

From the beginning, Gergen saw that if potential donors could be exposed to the talent, vitality, and idealism of HKS students, they would rally to the cause. In the two decades that followed, Gergen helped to create a dozen different student fellowships that made it possible for a diverse group of students of great promise to attend HKS and to graduate with little or no debt. Over 1,000 students from the U.S. and abroad graduated with CPL fellowships, answering a call to public leadership. Fellowships established under Gergen’s leadership focused on issues pertaining to the Middle East, to veteran’s affairs, to social justice, to the role of business in social change, and to emerging social leaders among others.

In 2010, CPL grew further when it integrated the Hauser Center for Civil Society into its operations. It was the first merger of two centers in the history of HKS and it served as a springboard for bringing together a range of faculty and students focused on social innovation and social change. The Center also created mechanisms for bringing senior public officials to campus to mentor students and educate others through the establishment of the Hauser Leadership program and the Gleitsman Award for Social Activism.

By the time Gergen stepped down as faculty director in 2019, CPL was providing millions of dollars in financial support each year through its different fellowship programs to students who would otherwise not be able to attend HKS, and was creating a community of practitioners and scholars around the world with a shared commitment to the common good.