

Leadership Considerations for Incoming Community College President

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I recall a story I learned about 40 years ago in a religious school. It dealt with a prankster that went around to numerous clergymen, of all faiths, asking them to teach him the principles of their religion during the time that he was able to stand on one foot. For days he went through town, being told that it wasn't possible and that he obviously wasn't interested in learning about their respective religion. One day he knocked at a particular clergyman's door, and again asked his question. This time, to his surprise, the clergyman answered that it was a simple request. The answer was "treat others as you would have them treat you, all else is commentary on this precept." According to the story, the prankster was so impressed that he decided to learn more about this clergyman and his religion.

If there were just one thing that I could tell a colleague just accepting an offer of a community college presidency, it would be to treat all those that worked for her, as she would like to be treated. There are of course many works on leadership and college presidencies available to any prospective presidential candidate.

One classic reference for any academic leader is by Robert Birnbaum (1992). Birnbaum breaks up his textbook into three major sections. The first section provides the reader with the concepts of leadership as addressed by the five-year study that serves as the basis of this book. Birnbaum (1992) continues in section two by presenting the numerous relationships that a president of a college establishes between herself and the people around her, both within and without of the college itself. Part three presents the results of the study of presidents at 32 colleges including 8 community colleges.

To a colleague about to assume the presidency of a college I would insist

that she read Birnbaum's (1992) second chapter. This chapter contains quotes and anecdotes from the interviewed college presidents, highlighting so-called "myths and mysteries." While I believe that O'Banion (1997) may disagree with the following anonymous quote from a college president, I found it enlightening:

I think that a president who announces what the vision of an institution is on day one is asking for trouble. You need to alter the vision to be consistent with the culture, or you have to let it emerge from what is being talked about on campus. (quoted in Birnbaum, 1992, p. 28)

Aside from addressing the above myth associated with presidential vision, Birnbaum (1992) addresses the following myths: the myth of the president as a transformational leader, the myth of presidential charisma, the myth of distancing a president from her followers, and the myth that there exists a single style or set of traits of a successful college president. The second half of the Birnbaum's (1992) myths and mysteries chapter deals with such mysteries as: the formation of a successful administrative team; the effects of experience on the successful college president; and, the real differences between men and women. Summarily, Birnbaum (1992) cannot supply any significant results based upon his five-year study that would lend support to any of the myths noted above.

A more pragmatic read for my colleague would be Balderston's (1995) text on the management of a university. This book would provide her with an overview of such daily activities as the governance, organization, budgets, budgeting systems, revenues, enrollments, tuition, fees, financial aid, facilities, graduate education, university-based research, standards, assessment, restructuring and insuring excellence (Balderston, 1995).

For many years, Dr. Gustavo Mellander conducted a graduate course in educational leadership at George Mason University and he liked to have his students read a book that contains biographies of some of the greatest leaders that we have had on this world, a book by Howard Gardner (1995).

Unfortunately, most leaders whose biographies are between the pages of this

book are white men. The only black leadership example is Martin Luther King, Jr., and there are no examples for Latinos. Prior to providing the biographies, Gardner (1995) provides an overview of his theory of what makes for a good leader, and his theory is tied up in the "stories of identity - narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed - that constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's literary arsenal." (p. 43) Thus, to Gardner (1995) it is the story that wraps up the leader and the leader that is wrapped up in her story.

The Gardner (1995) presentation is one of description, that is, leadership is defined by presenting descriptions of leaders. At the other end of the leadership reference spectrum are the books that are prescriptive, that is, the authors prescribe to the reader what it is leaders do. None are more prescriptive than John P. Kotter's book, which shows his ego by having his own name in the title of the book (Kotter, 1999). Kotter begins his book by laying out ten "observations about 'managerial behavior'" (p. 6) and he concludes with an agenda for a leader, specifically a general manager.

Two other prescriptive books were recommended to me when I interviewed leaders at the Manassas campus of the Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC). One by James K. Van Fleet (1972) lays out 22 mistakes that a leader is prone to make. The second by Philip B. Crosby (1984) lays out 14 crucial steps to total quality management, although the author promises that it won't involve any tears. A more exhaustive list (containing 30 key concepts for leaders) by Major General Perry Smith (1997) is available on the World Wide Web. General Smith will tell you that above all, a leader must know herself. General Smith himself refers to this list of 30 concepts as "30 blazing flashes of the obvious." (Smith, p. 1)

With respect to staff morale, Smith (1997) offers a minimum of eleven rules of thumb. For example, high on Smith's list is the need to be magnanimous. That is, leaders should be willing to share their power and allow talented person the ability to lead others themselves. Just below magnanimity is

the important characteristic of listening. Sometimes, a leader can make a follower feel important (thus increase morale) just by listening carefully to suggestions that she may have to give to the leader. Another important leadership role is to protect innovators. Smith notes that it is important to encourage those persons with ideas, and know when an idea is not a good one and should be ignored. Smith also has what he calls a "platinum rule." This is precisely what I had mentioned in the opening of this response, that is "treat others the way they would like to be treated." (Smith, 1997, rule #14)

Regarding a positive public image, Smith has approximately four key rules that he would have a leader follow. A leader needs to trust her instincts and her impulses. She should avoid what Smith calls "the cowardice of silence." That is, leaders need to be willing to make waves and speak out when something is wrong or someone has done something wrong. Smith (1997) even advocates maintaining a "sense of outrage." If there is something wrong that jeopardizes people that work for her, she must be willing to "get mad occasionally." She also must not be intimidated by anyone, especially male peers, who may try to put her in her place by showing what she doesn't know. Finally, Smith warns leaders against losing touch with the latest in their field. She must keep up with what is happening, and she cannot depend on her own personnel for that information.

Managing growth entails many qualities of a leader. As already mentioned, a leader needs to keep up with the latest in what is going on in her arena. She can do so by participating in the AACCC and the ACCT meetings. There are also symposiums that will allow her to keep touch with the community college innovations, especially the League for Innovation. She can also maintain correspondence with other peers in the area and across the nation. Basically, this is all covered by what Smith (1997) refers to as getting "ready for the future."

While some suggest a prescriptive list of things to do as a leader, others attempt to dispel what are referred to as myths about leadership. Susan Komives, Nance Lucas and Timothy McMahon (1998) refer to the following myths

regarding leadership.

- Leaders are born, not made.
- Leadership is hierarchical, and you need to hold a formal position (have status and power) to be considered a leader.
- You have to have charisma to be an effective leader.
- There is one standard way of leading.
- It is impossible to be a manager and a leader at the same time.
- You only need to have common sense to learn how to be an effective leader. (p. 27)

Komives, et al. (1998) support the shooting down of these myths with Gardner (1995) and other references. However, there are authors that not only espouse some of these myths but also take them to another level.

Unfortunately, one of these authors is by Robert Greene (1998), and his book was an international bestseller and sold millions of copies. Power and leadership, according to Greene (1998), go hand in hand. Not only does this support one of the myths of Komives et al. (1998), but it also concentrates on power as the key to leadership. Greene's form of leadership is nothing less than mean and nasty. For example, Greene notes that leaders should "get others to do the work for you, but always take the credit" (Greene, 1998, p. 56). This is not only counter to Smith's (1997) guidelines, but also runs counter to Komives et al. (1998) and of course Gardner (1995). Finally, don't look for Greene to recommend any vision or plan. Look at his last piece of advice for leaders, what he calls "assume formlessness." He notes that "by taking a shape, by having a visible plan, you open yourself to attack" (Greene, p. 419). Greene's type of leading with extreme aggression is scrutinized to some degree by Deborah Tannen (1998) in her book *The Argument Culture* where she spends an entire chapter examining the "aggressive culture." I know which culture I would prefer to work within, and from my experience, I think I know which leadership culture others would prefer as well.

One of my personal favorites among prescriptive books for leaders is one

that highlights 50 leadership lessons illustrated from examples that go back in time some 3200 years. The book by David Baron and Lynette Padwa (1999) reflects on the extraordinary leadership qualities of Moses. If you want to know about maintaining staff morale, you can read about how Moses sustained his leadership through 40 years in the desert (Hertz, 1964). If you want to learn about public image, you can look to see how Moses dealt with the Pharaoh of Egypt (Hertz, 1964). Moses knew he was a poor speaker as he humbly noted that he "was not a man of words" (Hertz, p. 219). He tried to use that as an excuse not to go before Pharaoh; but he was told by God "is there not Aaron, thy brother." (p. 220) Aaron was apparently known for his oratory abilities, and here Moses gets an additional lesson in delegating authority. If you want to learn about managing growth, you can see how Moses managed the growth of a people over 40 years under extremely harsh conditions. Moses didn't need to raise any monetary funds, but desert survival is as difficult and tricky as raising money for any educational institution. Baron and Padwa (1999) also point out that Moses demonstrated how to "resolve conflicts quickly and objectively" (Baron & Padwa, 1999, p. 160) as demonstrated by the rebellion of Korach (Hertz, p. 638). Finally, if you wanted an illustration of a mission statement, can you imagine a more respected one for a nation than the Ten Commandments?

Under the assumption from the question that my colleague is a woman, I would also recommend that she look into joining the National Institute for Leadership Development (NILD) housed in Phoenix, Arizona (Wolin, 2001). This organization is geared to women leaders of community colleges. NILD notes that there are now almost 400 community college chief executive officers within the organization. If this data can be combined with Cohen and Brawer (1997), then roughly 40 percent of the community colleges in the nation are run by women.

NILD stresses that leaders do not have to compete in order to excel (Wolin, 2001). Furthermore, NILD stresses that there are many leadership methodologies, all of which are equally valid and should be acknowledged as

being so. NILD also stresses that "leaders are more effective when they support and encourage others" (Wolin, 2001). These concepts are in agreement with many of the prescriptive edicts of other leaders, such as Smith (1997) and Moses. The latter exemplifying how "leadership is not so much the exercise of power itself as the empowerment of others." (Baron & Padwa, 1999, p. 102)

Even with all these lessons to be learned from leaders going back in time as much as 3200 years, my colleague will benefit most by doing the job. Perhaps the following quote sums it up best: "You learn to talk by talking, you learn to walk by walking, you learn golf by golfing, you learn typing by typing, you learn best by doing it!" (Dryden & Vos, 1999, p. 162) I will add that my colleague will best learn how to lead, by leading. If a crisis arises, remember that John F. Kennedy said "great crises produce great men [and women], and great deeds of courage" (Kennedy, 1956, p. 51).

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