

The Pathway to LEADERSHIP

By Livingston Alexander

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio is duped into believing that he could do the improbable—rise above his lowly rank of servant by marrying the countess, Olivia. A letter with Olivia's forged signature is the instrument used to carry out the malicious joke on Malvolio, and one memorable proclamation in that letter gives power to Malvolio's ensuing self-delusion: "If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em."

That memorable passage from Shakespeare's popular romantic comedy gives a mere mocking reference to "greatness" in a maliciously contrived context.

However, a change in context and slight adaptation in the passage enables a conclusion about the pathways leaders take to leadership positions: "Some are born leaders, some achieve leadership, and some have leadership thrust upon them."



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My Own Road

I was not endowed from birth with natural leadership qualities. Nor was leadership thrust upon me because I possessed some unique and narrow skill set or was reputed for resolving crises. My growth and maturation as a leader have been fueled in part by observing other leaders making important decisions when their leadership was on the line. But even more important than the good and bad leader examples that I observed were my own encounters with what Michael Useem (1998) refers to as “exceptionally difficult decisions”—those fateful moments when goals are at stake, their achievement is uncertain, and the outcome depends on mobilizing others to realize success.¹

One exceptionally difficult decision that I made during my first stint as a vice president for academic affairs challenged my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual capacities in ways that I had never experienced. Fresh from a summer-long courtroom trial that had ended with the jury siding with my institution in a tenure-denial case involving the dean of the Division of Mathematics and Computer Science, I was faced with the daunting prospect of conducting a search to replace the now departing dean. The dean had been hired before salaries in computer science had risen precipitously during the late 1990s. It was clear that to recruit a dean in the prevailing highly competitive computer science market would require a salary well beyond our means, one that would drain away precious resources from other growth areas and severely hamper our efforts to implement our strategic plan.

After consulting at length with the math and computer science faculty and faculty in other divisions, we decided that the best course of action for the institu-

tion was to dissolve the Division of Mathematics and Computer Science. Mathematics would be moved to Arts and Sciences and computer science would go to the Division of Business. The rationale for the decision was that the number of faculty and students in the Division of Mathematics and Computer Science was relatively small. The size and level of productivity did not justify the cost of continuing as a standalone division. Ultimately, we concluded that dissolving

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the division would enable us to better support the institution's other strategic priorities.

Within a matter of hours after the decision was announced, students from the merged division were demanding that I meet with them to explain our decision. The computer science faculty had already publicly articulated their strong opposition. When I met with the students, I experienced firsthand the full brunt of their anger and outrage, much of it fueled by misinformation coming from the faculty. The rumor circulating throughout the campus was that the relocation of computer science to the business division would change the preferred programming and software engineering model to a more applied, business-oriented curriculum. The students demanded that I

rescind the decision to dissolve the division or else they would transfer to other institutions.

I had never before been confronted in such an aggressive manner by students and faculty. I listened intently to all the student speakers. In the end, I stated that I understood their concerns and anxieties, but the decision to dissolve the division would stand. After giving the reasons, I gave them my word that the curriculum would remain intact and that the computer science faculty would remain the only persons on our campus who could change the curriculum. I also assured the students and faculty that the computer science program would be stronger because more resources would be available.

The discussions and debates about this decision continued with students and faculty for quite some time after that first encounter. However, that initial meeting with students was a pivotal point in those discussions. The nature and tone of the ensuing discourse changed; while initially confrontational and antagonistic, students and faculty gradually adopted a wait-and-see attitude. In the discussions that followed, both groups frequently reminded me of my commitments that the curriculum would not be changed and that the program would receive more resources, commitments that I reaffirmed.

Interestingly, a sizable number of students later expressed their gratitude that I had come to their classes to listen and explain the rationale for the decision. More than any other action, that gesture convinced them that I cared enough about their concerns to subject myself and the decision I had made to their intense criticism and scrutiny. By the end of the fall semester, few people seemed to remember that there had been debate and confrontation about the decision.

This particular example forced me, perhaps for the first time in my career, to think about and formulate my views about leadership, even as I was dealing with a difficult situation. Among the questions I grappled with were: Does leadership entitle me to rule arbitrarily with an iron fist? Or is leadership a privilege that requires the leader to listen to and consider the viewpoints of others? Is leadership exercised when one opts for the most popular, least resistant choice? Or does true leadership require commitment to underlying principles and the greater good, even in the face of opposition and resistance? In the end, I thought it wiser to adopt a long-term solution that ensured the future viability of our academic programs, rather than settle for short-term trade-offs.

The experience also led me to form one of my guiding principles in achieving leadership: *Be clear about your underlying principles during periods of conflict and discord or in making difficult decisions. Determine your level of commitment to the underlying principles under threat. If the commitment is strong, then proceed to act with purpose and conviction, even in the face of opposition.*

Standing on Principle

During that same tenure as vice president for academic affairs, a higher education desegregation lawsuit that had been dormant for nearly 10 years sprang to life. My position as a black executive officer of a historically white Southern university placed me in the unenviable position of teaming with white higher education officials in waging a legal battle against the historically black institutions in the state. As one who grew up in the Deep South during the Jim Crow era, I could never have imagined that

I would find myself in such a predicament. Tormented to no end by this unexpected development, and in an almost surreal frame of mind, I contemplated one question after another: How would I manage the intense negative feelings from my own prior experiences with segregation that were now rushing to the surface? What arguments could possibly justify my continued association with, let alone my defense of, an institution purportedly established to provide an alternative for whites who didn't want to attend a black institution?

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Would onlookers in the courtroom regard the lone black man sitting with the defendants in this case as an "Uncle Tom," or as some useless and hapless token?

Of course, there were no simple answers. My only apparent recourse was to resign and look for another job; and I was prepared to do precisely that because of my firsthand experience with segregation and the well-documented brutalizing effects of segregation on its victims. Two things changed my mind, however, and both helped me resolve important value conflicts. The first was the practical matter of my family's financial condition and, related to that, my ongoing efforts to follow a career path in higher education that few blacks had the opportunity to enter. The second

was my review of the long-standing court challenge and the position of my institution relative to that challenge. In that regard, central to the lawsuit was the claim that the ongoing presence and continued operation of my institution in effect compromised the mission of the nearby historically black institution, making it difficult for the latter to thrive and reach its potential. The plaintiffs contended that the only viable resolutions were either outright closing of our institution or merging it with the nearby historically black institution.

The review prompted me to understand important distinctions between the missions of the institutions involved in the case. Our mission was to serve working adult students; all of our classes were scheduled either in the evening or on weekends. The other historically white co-defendant institutions served traditional students and their classes were scheduled during the day. Our mission to serve nontraditional, working adults did not appear to compromise or threaten the mission of the nearby historically black institution, whose mission was to serve traditional students and whose classes were offered during the day, exclusively on weekdays. One additional redeeming element in our favor was the relatively high percentage of minority students (31 percent) enrolled in our institution.

The scene in the courtroom was as I had envisioned it and as I had feared. I was the lone black person sitting with the white defendants on one side of the courtroom. On the other side were the higher education officials from the historically black institutions and their attorneys. My fear quickly turned to dread when I noticed that among the attorneys representing the plaintiffs were the renowned Fred Gray, who

defended Rosa Parks in 1955 when the civil rights icon took her defiant stand, and Solomon Seay Jr., son of the noted civil rights pioneer, the Reverend Solomon Seay Sr. I could feel myself sinking lower in my seat as I thought dejectedly, “What on earth am I doing here?”

As chief academic officer, my testimony was pivotal for our defense and significant in the view of the plaintiffs as well. I had prepared well and was remarkably composed, given the circumstances. I was peppered with a dozen or more simple questions about my background, all of these leading to the critical questions, “How can you justify the continued presence of your institution when there is one available a short distance away?” and “Why shouldn’t the state close your institution or merge it into the historically black institution in town?”

The responses came out of me with purpose and conviction. I explained that I have always respected and valued the important role played by the historically black colleges and that I would vehemently resist any efforts to undermine that important role. I explained further that the two institutions in question had different and distinct, but important, missions to execute, both serving underrepresented students. In the end, the ensuing federal court decree affirmed our position and directed our two institutions to cooperate when possible in executing our distinct yet complementary missions.

My decision to stand by my institution was based on the clarity and integrity of our mission and on the obligation I felt to protect the trust placed in me to serve the institution and its constituents. This situation also led to a second guiding principle in achieving leadership: *To be chosen for leadership is a privi-*

lege. With the privilege to lead comes responsibility—to protect the integrity and reputation of the organization; to produce desired results; and to safeguard the members of the organization who depend on it for their livelihood. Except when one is faced with challenges to moral and ethical standards, those imperatives of leadership supersede personal agendas and biases, political beliefs and affiliations, and philosophical orientations.

Leadership Under Fire

In my subsequent position as provost of a 13,000-student state university, I encountered new sets of exceptionally challenging circumstances. The institution had attained university status shortly before my appointment. In spite of this new status, it still resembled a small college in many ways. Part of my charge was to lead the effort to upgrade the internal infrastructure. But I shortly discovered that my real lessons would derive from circumstances related to the university’s top leader.

The president of our institution was a remarkable leader who had established a strong academic reputation in his discipline and had served eminently in leadership positions at other institutions. An intellectual giant, he exuded self-confidence and wasn’t afraid to step to the plate to make bold decisions. Unfortunately, another of his admirable qualities—his abiding trust in people—led to his demise. The details of this shortened leadership tenure cannot be fully described because many of the people associated with the events in question are still active at the institution.

In any event, it is critical to note that the turmoil that accompanies an imperiled leader often produces collateral damage. The fact that I never wavered in

my loyalty to this exceptional president spelled doom for my administrative career at that institution, yet the insights about myself and about leadership that I gained through that ordeal were invaluable. First, I discovered that personal and professional loyalty is much more important than “looking out for number one.” This should not, of course, be confused with blind loyalty. In private meetings, I challenged the president on many issues. Our discussions led to a meeting of the minds on most matters, but not all.



From the unfortunate mistake of my admired, but fallen, leader, I learned much about the practice of leadership. Perhaps the most important task of a leader is to select trustworthy and loyal associates to be part of the leadership team. This president had selected someone for his leadership team who later undermined his presidency. That outcome underscored an admonition by Fisher and Koch (1996) that loyalty on one’s staff is as important as competence and that “to tolerate even the slightest disloyalty from an administrative subordinate is to set a shorter time limit on an effective presidency” (p. 110).²

From this experience comes my third principle for achieving leadership: *In building a leadership team, appoint supremely competent persons who clearly understand that their role is to*

implement the institutional vision and plan. Complete the requisite background reviews and face-to-face interviews to confirm that potential team members will be loyal and trustworthy.

Building for the Future

At the time of my appointment to my current position as president of a baccalaureate institution located in the rural Appalachian region of north central Pennsylvania, the campus was in the midst of major transformations, including a significant building and infrastructure renewal effort. My predecessor had been masterful in transforming a fledgling two-year institution into a promising four-year college. He had very astutely mobilized the requisite resources to fund numerous construction projects, even in a context of flat or declining enrollments.

Such developments would seemingly be cause for joy among members of the campus community. However, as I made my rounds during the first few weeks of my appointment, it became apparent that many constituents within the campus community, particularly the faculty, were indifferent to this new construction. To my disappointment, I discovered that the building and renovation projects, which might one day transform our campus into one of the most beautiful in the state, did not appear to make much of an impression on many of the faculty and staff.

At its essence, the problem was that our institution had a number of significant assets, highly valued by some, but not all, stakeholders. The campus was not well positioned to take advantage of these assets because of the absence of a collective institutional vision and the existence of rampant distrust; internal jockeying for power, position, and resources; dysfunctional

organizational units; and overall low institutional self-esteem.

Feeling a sense of urgency to define a clear direction for the future and mobilize campus support for the new direction, I initiated a strategic planning process two months after arriving on campus. The planning process was comprehensive in scope and involved representatives of all university constituents. As the process unfolded, every single member of the campus community had the opportunity to provide input. It was the commitment to openness and the promotion of public discussion at every stage of the process that ultimately was the key to building campus-wide ownership of the vision and new direction.

The resulting strategic plan featured a collaboratively developed vision, eight major strategic directions, strategic initiatives to advance the new directions, and a planning and budgeting timeline closely linked to the strategic directions and action plans. Each and every one of our accomplishments during the last four years can be directly linked to our ongoing planning efforts. Even proposed initiatives that many thought were impractical and unattainable because of cost suddenly became attainable. For instance, the recent ranking of our institution by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the 30 best baccalaureate colleges in the North was never part of our vision because no one had ever envisioned that as a possibility. An important lesson I've learned in developing and implementing strategic plans is to adhere to the ancient wisdom of Heraclitus who said, "Expect the unexpected or you won't find it."

In a general sense, my views and perspectives on leadership had become relatively well-defined by the time I was appointed president. Those

views and perspectives were formed and refined as I moved through varied and increasingly responsible roles as leader of specific units within higher education institutions. The role of overall campus leader, however, has forced me to make significant adaptations in the way that I exercise leadership. For example, effecting organizational change requires that I work harder and more shrewdly to achieve ownership as president than I did as provost because I now serve many more constituent groups. Faculty, staff, administrators, governing board, alumni, donors, politicians, and community friends and supporters all have a stake in our academic enterprise; all feel that they should have a voice in the vision and future direction of the institution.

Admittedly, accommodating all of those voices has been challenging. The success our institution has achieved thus far has stemmed from our firm and resolute commitment to listen to and reflect in our vision the aspirations of all constituents. In the end, the harmonious spirit that sometimes sweeps our campus is the outgrowth of a shared institutional dream that promises new levels of achievement beyond any one person's imagination. Therefore, my final guiding principle for achieving leadership: *The road to success as a leader begins with a vision and ends with the euphoria constituents feel when vision becomes reality.* ■

Notes:

1. Useem, M. (1998). *The leadership moment: 9 true stories of triumph & disaster & their lessons for us all*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
2. Fisher, J. L., & Koch, J. V. (1996). *Presidential leadership: Making a difference*. Phoenix, AZ: American Council on Education/Oryx Press.

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