

“Building Fires and Diggings Wells,” John Roush, President, Centre College, 2/13/2019
(Talking Paper)

So, let me begin. I have titled my remarks this morning “Building fires and digging wells.” My inspiration comes from an old Celtic saying that has rung true throughout the ages and remains true in our new century: We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle. We all drink from wells we did not dig.

Each of us has been encouraged, supported, and lifted up by parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches and others who have gone before us to kindle fires and dig wells in order that we might have the opportunity to grow and learn – to be warmed and nourished, if you will – by those who have gone before, and thereby prepared for your future, our future.

And, if being part of any honest work is about being prepared for tomorrow’s world, what might we know about that world and our nation, in particular? The face of America will continue to change, quite literally. Ethnic and racial diversity in the United States will increase and become more geographically widespread. Forecasters tell us that the number of American men and women over 85 will double before 2020.

Charitable giving by individuals in the U.S. is likely to remain at current levels (Americans give about 1.8 percent of their disposable income to charitable causes, compared to 3.2 percent in the 1950’s). Family life will bear less resemblance to the past. The number of latchkey children will grow, the number of children being raised by their grandparents will increase, and families will continue to do less together.

They report that the impact of information technology in our day-to-day life, a concept unknown and unimagined at the beginning of the 20th century, will outdistance anything we might imagine today. They speculate that we may finally move away from our near total reliance on fossil fuels. They report that an environmental disaster or terrorist action of proportions we have never known is somewhere between possible and probable. They predict that children will be less fit in the next century though exercise equipment will offer virtual reality options that will make one's workout unbelievably lifelike. They speculate that our country's renewed interest in matters of faith will continue to grow even as church attendance declines.

But, you might ask, what has this to be with me? Well, let me suggest that those who lead are all about “building fires” and “digging wells, though, often, citizen-leaders, like those of you in this room, have the great privilege of witnessing the impact of your work, your leadership. And, with this as a backdrop, let me turn to the primary target of my paper, “forever becoming leader”

As a student of leadership, it has been my privilege to study and teach and lecture and write on this aspect of the human condition for some 35 years. With this said, I remain, as I tell my students each year, a WIP – a “work in progress.” Moreover, I have often suggested that good and effective leaders – the type to be admired and sorely needed these days – are ones about the business of “building fires” and “digging wells.”

So, in keeping with all of us being works in progress – forever in the state of “becoming” all that I might become, let me try to call off several aspects of leadership that represent some of the primary elements that would be considered “best practice” when it comes to the study of and preparation for leadership.

There Is No Cookbook! My first advice to my students and to you is this: Burn all the cue cards, dump all the checklists, and if anyone tries to sell you his or her version of a "leadership cookbook," politely walk away. The cue cards, the checklists, the cookbooks—each is an incomplete and sometimes misleading way to describe the phenomenon and prescribe the behaviors of men and women who lead.

This is a tough first step, for all of us are tempted, or want to think there is a leadership master plan and that, at heart, all great leaders are alike or at least nearly so. The paradoxical truth is that, by definition, every leader has a unique imprint—her or her "leadership fingerprint," if you will. No two leaders—regardless of common factors of age, gender, sexuality, race, or nationality—are alike. Those who truly excel at leadership learn how to capitalize on their fingerprint. They systematically cultivate one-of-a-kind thinking based on the strengths, needs, and potential of their organization and the people who work alongside them.

Notwithstanding the differences and individuality of leaders, there is common ground—principles, habits, attitudes, commitments—that characterize the men and women best equipped to provide leadership for the modern organization. These are not rules, or ingredients, but qualities of leaders who achieve greatness and goodness in their own unique way. Let's call them qualities of person, as I think this language comes closest to describing what effective leaders tend to share in common. These qualities, then, help to provide a backdrop against which a person can take personal inventory of the characteristics, skills, and experiences that would shape his or her fingerprint in a leadership role.

I have identified seven qualities of person. Most are variations on the ideas of others who have thought deeply and written with some clarity about leadership. There are leadership scholars who have more to say about these and other elements of leadership, and I commend them to you. These seven qualities of person are placed in priority order—some things simply are more important. At the risk of appearing falsely humble, I suggest to you that what I have to share – in its entirety – is *not* rocket science. And, there are other attributes, qualities of person that you might judge are more important than the seven I call off below in brief. Good for you! That sort of civil disagreement is good for the whole – all about being liberally educated.

One, Telling the Truth. Sounds simple, but the single biggest problem facing leaders today is the allure of the half-truth: the idea that you're only dishonest if you utter an outright lie. In other words, what is *not* said has nothing to do with honesty—a tempting shortcut? Yes, but it carries a hefty price. The truth has a way of coming to light in its entirety, casting an uncomfortable glare on the most inconvenient facts. In that glare, the cost of dishonesty is evident—strikingly so. If you get caught in a jam, even a real tough one, tell the truth. We Americans are very good at forgiving, and even forgetting, but we are very tough on leaders who disrespect us by not giving us the facts and diminish the role of leader by being disingenuous. This habit of not telling the truth makes it harder on all those called to leadership, as one dishonest leader can generate a

creeping cynicism that makes leading all the more difficult for others. Truth telling is about personal courage—a willingness to do the right thing. It comes first in leadership. Without truth, there is no trust, and without trust, leadership is impossible.

I also have come to believe that the leaders in an organization hold the key to creating a culture of honesty, and this, I can assure you, is a critical aspect of leading a successful organization, whether it is a profit or not-for-profit, big or small, complex or otherwise. I often tell my students that they should make an effort to tell the truth lovingly whenever possible, but they must not let their fear of offending get in the way of truth telling. The price is way too high.

Two, Serving. Oh, my, here we go with the line about how the leader should or must always put the needs of others above his or hers at all times. I will stop short of this ideal. But, let me be clear that the leader who wishes to lead his or her organization for the longer pull must be prepared to put others above self. Men and women of faith have an edge in understanding the value of this quality; but being a person of faith does not guarantee this quality. The person who sees leadership as service tends to be a person with a humble spirit: a leader, who takes his or her work seriously, but himself or herself – not so much.

So much of this quality is about attitude. It was once explained to me by a wise person that to be humble is not to think less or poorly of oneself, but to not think of oneself at all. Now, that is a very high standard, one to which I can only aspire, but I like the notion of the leader, in his or her role as leader, not “thinking” of himself, not “thinking” of herself in fulfilling the leadership role. Leaders who serve report that they work *with* others, not that their co-workers work for them. People who see leadership as an opportunity to serve are men and women who do not assume they are “deserving” of the perquisites—financial and otherwise—that often accompany leadership positions, particularly in formal organizations.

And, while it is human nature to enjoy the good things that often come with being called leader, servant leaders never forget from whence they came. Servant leaders know that the privileges of being in charge are not to be abused. They understand that their most important role in the organization is to encourage, create opportunity, and inspire success among the men and women who serve alongside them. They never forget that leaders need followers, and the good and effective leader serves strives to be the kind of leader he or she would want to follow.

Three, Communicating True North. Good leaders are charged with staying focused on and communicating the organization's primary mission—“true north,” if you will. Establishing the organization's mission is an administrative skill deserving of a separate article, but the best leaders, when faced with important decisions or opportunities to communicate, ask themselves: “Does my action serve or advance the organization's mission?”

And, being a good communicator has little to do with being an outstanding orator, though this is another leadership skill to be coveted. No, leaders who communicate well are committed to being sure that their organization *shares* important and strategic information in an honest, timely way, thus allowing employees at all levels to be reminded of the organization's mission and know what is occurring in the life of the enterprise.

And, as this occurs, a working environment is created in which the employees develop a sense of ownership and loyalty that will advance the organization's mission, whatever it might be.

Communication becomes the foundation for motivation within the organization. The leaders of larger, more complex organizations "communicate" by being certain the leaders working alongside them share this same commitment to communication. There is no magic to all this, and in the final analysis effective communication is not about newsletters and e-mails and staff meetings, though all of these can assist in the effort and are almost always a part of the process. Being an effective communicator of true north is, once again, about attitude, and motivation – about believing and trusting in the men and women who work in the organization. And, my experience tells me that all of us get sloppy in this area.

We forget that new men and women join our organization and are unaware of our organization's culture and peculiarities. This oversight is unintentional, but can, over time, create confusion summed up by the classic phrase, "Well, I thought *everyone* knew about that rule or policy or organizational habit." One final note on communicating true north: first-rate, comprehensive planning, used as a leadership tool, can do a great deal to help define or redefine organizational mission and create an environment where communication is timely, honest, and provides a context for the men and women who carry out the work of the organization.

Four, Giving Authority. I often refer to this as one's ability to "hand-off," tracing back to my days long ago as a football player and coach. Handing-off means giving authority to people. In football, when the quarterback hands it off, he really is giving it up to the runner and the nine other folks who will make something happen with that opportunity. This quality is really about trust and wisdom and believing in the worth of one's fellow workers—the *other* leaders in the organization. A great many leaders talk a lot about giving authority, but, when faced with the opportunity to do so, they just can't live it out. To be about the business of handing off, the leader must live with the reality that occasionally able people will do things differently from the way he or she would do them. You can get sideswiped and sometimes surprised, but if you hire good people, you must let them do the work. You'll never move forward without investing capable people with authority. Good leaders develop a capacity for and come to understand the wisdom of handing off.

This has been a leadership strength for me, though I was never a quarterback. It has been my very good fortune to be surrounded by excellent people in almost every job I have held in these many years. My genius, if I have any, has been to let these men and women do their jobs. In short order I become their advisor, their counselor—asking questions, probing for data to support their decisions, handing out credit and recognition to them without a pause.

Five, Cultivating Informed Intuition. In my view, technology is a wonderful thing. The capacity we have to gather and analyze important data has never been greater. I am a leader who likes to have information—lots of it. But, even in this age of instantaneous data, a single decision may carry more weight than a million facts. My point: care about the research and know the latest trends, but know, ultimately, many important decisions (and almost all the really difficult ones) require some new and unknown synthesis that is neither guess nor fact. Good leaders learn to follow their informed intuition. Most of the leaders I know who have

distinguished themselves in their company or field are ones who trust their instincts. They cultivate the practice of receiving and understanding data and reports and recommendations, but they also have learned to trust their sense of rightness, their informed intuition. You will want to exercise some care here.

Never forget that some men and women (those who work *with* you and those you may work *for*) are determined to make everything data driven; if there is no solid information to support a choice, then he or she doesn't make it. As a leader, you cannot discount this position. Rather, you must arm yourself with the best information available surrounding a choice that needs to be made, then - as leader - decide when it's right to pull the trigger and accept the consequences. Moments of absolute certainty rarely arrive!

Six, Building Pockets of Greatness. You should know that I have adjusted my seven qualities of person by one, replacing what had been #6, "Fixing Irritation," with a new one titled, "Building Pockets of Greatness." I have been persuaded in the last several years that this characteristic of leadership is more important—much more so at this moment in time—than fixing irritation, a quality that called for the leader to be alert to fix irritation as a way for him or her to stay grounded in reality and to maintain a sense of humility about the total effort of the organization. Acknowledging that no leader can fix irritation everywhere, good leaders make a practice of finding flaw and making sure it is corrected.

Building pockets of greatness draws its inspiration from Jim Collins' booklet, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, where he maintains that "It might take decades to change the systemic context, and you might be retired or dead by the time those changes come. In the meantime, what are you going to do *now*? This is where the Stockdale Paradox (an inspiring portion of the book, *Good to Great*) comes into play: You must retain faith that you can prevail to greatness in the end, while retaining the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality. What can you do today to create a pocket of greatness, despite the brutal facts of your environment?"^[2] Such is the charge to those who lead. Unable to fix all of the problems in any organization, one must strive to create pockets of greatness.

Seven, Dreaming Big and Hitting Homeruns on Occasion. Freud had a lot to say about dreams that emerge from the unconscious, but leaders must embolden themselves for dreams of the conscious kind. One mark of a leader is the will to swing for the fence, aiming for the homerun. If a leader can inspire his or her organization to dream big, every individual becomes better for it. Finding a challenging task and executing it with confidence serves to raise the bar for the whole organization. And big dreams aren't reserved only for big organizations.

The organization I serve, Centre College, became the smallest college in the smallest town *ever* to host a General Election Debate in October of 2000, and, again, in 2012. These debates, in fact, set "the standard by which other national debates are judged." It was a dream articulated and flawlessly executed by an entire team of people at Centre, in Danville, and in Kentucky. A leader can and should have high aspirations, whether the setting is an elementary school PTA with 50 active members or a corporation with 5,000 employees. To be clear, I am not talking

^[2] *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins, 2005, p. 30.

about ideas that completely outstrip the ability and capacity of the people staffing the organization. That's a quick road to ruin. Good leaders understand that a big challenge, successfully executed, creates an organization full of men and women who forever believe "they can."

These seven qualities of person that manifest themselves in those who lead might be thought of as a cross between common sense and being smart – evidence one more time that good and effective and even inspired leadership is not rocket science, but a phenomenon that can have the effect of rocket fuel in your organization.

How might I end my essay? Being a good and effective leader is more about developing and maintaining a practice of curiosity, inquiry, and the testing of good ideas than it is about acquiring and applying an established set of facts or skills. Authentic leadership, if I may be permitted one final sports analogy, is akin to being a skilled athlete who has mastered the fundamentals, but who approaches each play fresh, always observing, learning, and applying new knowledge, even in the heat of action.

Good and effective leaders know that there is no magic to being successful – they understand through experience and intuition that each day will require courage, knowledge, flexibility, honesty, humility, focus, trust, judgment, aspiration, inspiration, and more. Leadership, particularly in these times, demands our best, and these men and women, our nation's current students and tomorrow's citizen-leaders, are best served by having the opportunity to study and be prepared for leadership!

Now in my 21th year in the presidency at Centre College, my wife, Susie, and I talk often and are asked often about our journey – now a married adventure of some 45 years – in life and leadership. There have been a whole list of “magical moments” in our 45 years – too many to mention, but the magic has been in the results, not the effort. Good and effective leadership, at day's end, is a rich and wonderful combination of good talent (not necessarily great talent), hard work, common sense, and a dose of good luck – though I remind you that Louis Pasteur, the world-famous, 18th Century scientist/inventor reminds us that, “Fortune favors the prepared mind.”