

A Jesuit University President's Personal Lessons on Leadership

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I appreciate very much being asked to speak again at my Rotary #4 Club—it has been awhile—and to do so in this year's series on leadership. I have learned that what you can say in a speech depends so much on who you are speaking to. I can speak to you on leadership in a quite personal manner because you know me and, even more importantly, I know you, the kind of persons you are, your commitment to service above self, and the kind of supportive fellowship we enjoy and foster among ourselves.

I say this because I believe leadership is very a personal, even very intimate kind of thing; as personal as family, friends, feelings, values, and love. Leadership in its actuality is not found in handbooks or manuals on leadership skills, but rather is found in persons, unique persons with a particular kind of leadership. That's why it is so valuable this year that we are exploring leadership from so many different people each with her or his angle. My topic today, because it is the angle of my experience is "A Jesuit University President's Personal Lessons on Leadership".

In my now more than 20 years as a university president I have had as the chairs of my board and each as mentors: John Ellis, Jim Sinegal, Steve Hooper, Phyllis Campbell, Betty Woods, and Bob Ratliffe. Each of them is a leader in his or her own way and together they are the proof that leadership is indeed very personal, intimate, differing, powerful, unique. I speak to you today and speak from my twenty years of experience of leadership as president of Seattle University because I believe each of you is a leader in your own way—not just some of you—and that there is nothing that so evokes and helps us understand, cherish, and grow in our leadership than a dialogue with one another from experience. So here goes.

I should start by saying that I was not sure I wanted to be president of Seattle U. It seemed too big and I felt too small. When I was informed by phone that the board had elected me, I was told: "The board wants you to know that it believes you lack three things: any academic administration experience, do not have knowledge of finances, and have never done significant fundraising, nevertheless it believes you will be a great president." They believed in who I was, the kind of Jesuit I was, my love of students, and a personal quality of leadership—and that I could learn those other things—but that I had the essential things. Indeed leadership is very personal!

Let me give you some context. Being president of Seattle U. is a very complex role. University of California president Clark Kerr once said that being a university president is less like being a CEO and more like being the mayor of a city because of all the constituencies. For me it means a university of 7, 500 students of all levels of higher education, 1600 faculty and staff, 80,000 alumni, a 40-person board of trustees, thousands of donors, an annual budget of \$215 million which is 90% dependent on tuition, fundraising about \$40 million a year, being fully engaged with the civic community and with key partners, serving on multiple municipal boards, living as

a Jesuit within a Jesuit community, maintaining a prayer life, giving about 250 talks a year in 20 of which I actually say something—this is one of them—holding and articulating and animating the mission of the university and dealing with tens of thousands of sports fans... and doing this for a very long time.

When I started, my predecessor, Fr. Bill Sullivan, told me that since he was the 20th president of SU and had served 20 years, I, as the 21st president, needed to serve 21 years! No way, I thought! In my first five years as I was finding my way I hated the frequent question, “Do you enjoy being president?” Enjoy?! Too big, too difficult, too all-consuming to apply the word “enjoy”. Now I can say I do enjoy it, but it is an enjoying which is more like it being meaningful, satisfying, hugely worthwhile, and always growing, learning, serving, a fullness of feeling, and fulfilling of a religious calling. So here I am in my 21st year. There is nothing like this context—or should I say vortex—to grow personally, to deepen, and to learn some things about leadership.

My first lesson is in my mind the core of all leadership. It is the integration of what I call the “I” and the “it” of leadership. The “it” is the set of responsibilities, the demands of the position, the thousands of expectations of others all around about what you should do, and how you should do it, and who you should be. There is no leadership without an “it”, we can’t avoid it. But if we live only into that “it”, we are trying to live others’ lives, others’ expectation. It is not first-hand living; it is second-hand, not your life but theirs. To try to live exclusively those expectations, this “it”, is deadly. I know because I tried and I had a heart attack after the first year as president. The “it”—when that is what you are all about—can kill you.

The other necessary element of any leadership is the “I”. For me that’s a guy who was a shy, sensitive kid growing up in the Territory of Alaska, a somewhat introverted person needing privacy, a person who from the age of three knew he wanted to be a priest, someone who owes everything to and loves the Jesuits, lives in a brotherhood in community, and a person with a rather philosophical mind and a poetic heart. That is the “I”. Now you can’t just be this “I” in leadership or you’ll last about a week. You can’t “just be me”.

The core in my mind, the grand lesson, the one on which everything else about leadership depends, is the integration of the “I” and the “it”. It’s as simple as that and as difficult as that. What it means is finding the way the “I”, who you are, gives shape, and direction, and energy, and light, and life, and power to the “it”. How does who you are most personally flow into and give form to the “it”, what you do, and how you are in living the responsibilities of leadership? This integration of the “I” and the “it” flows just as much and just as importantly in the other direction. How does the “it”—the context and demands—draw out, change, expand, deepen, grow, open up new potentialities and creativity of the “I”, the intimate person of the leader? I believe there is nothing—perhaps next to love—that so makes a person grow as does integrated leadership.

This one lesson from my personal experience is worth this whole talk. Everything else about leadership—and I mean everything by the way of skills, strategies, and insights—depends on this core being in place. Everything else hangs from and builds on this critical core of the integration of the “I” and the “it”. Without this heart of leadership, the rest is somewhat superficial, mechanical not genuine, mere performance.

My second personal lesson on leadership from my 20 years of experience as a Jesuit university president picks up especially on the Jesuit dimension and applies it to all leadership. It asks the question, “What are the renewing and empowering sources of integrated leadership?” Another way of asking this is, “Where does the ‘I’ draw its life to meet and shape the demands of leadership?”

Let me start with myself. Remember leadership is not a thing; it is a very personal, unique, lived reality, not found in a handbook on a shelf, but found in a self. The sources of my personal leadership come from an hour every morning made up of being present to my truth in silence before God (which is what we call prayer), some pondering on scripture, daily dipping in this hour into enjoying poetry which gets to the tender roots of life, and some journalling time reflecting on how I lived the previous day and how I hope to live the coming one. That is the wellspring of the “I” and its integration with my responsibilities. I would not give up that hour for anything. Sometimes when travelling I need to do it in an airport lounge or buckled and leaning back in coach class on a jet. I never miss it. It is the anchor of my life; it is getting the bubble in the plane back in the middle between the lines so that I and what I do is in balance. Someone has said that the recipe for a healthy life is finding for the resourcing of one’s self an hour a day, a day a week, a weekend a month, a week a year. I believe it and believe it is increasingly critical for us in our age of urgency and rapidity. I find some of this on walks around Green Lake on weekends, or a weekend at a cabin, on an annual week on a retreat. Most people tell me the hardest to find is that hour a day.

This is my way—shaped by my Jesuit life of prayer, faith, privacy, and celibacy—but everyone needs to find his or her sources or wellsprings to integrate a renewed and peaceful “I” into what we do and how we lead. Some may find it in running, or jogging, or biking, or working out, or hiking; some may find it in conversation with a friend, in family, in love of a partner; some in music or art and or films, or reading, or over a good meal, or in a forest, or anywhere near water. We all need it just for living healthily, fully, living our true life, our only life. We need it even more for leadership, if it is to be empowered leadership which sustains itself. By the way, no one has ever burned out in leadership by working too hard or too long. You burn out only because of an unresolved conflict between the “I” and the “it” in work. Those unresolved internal personal conflicts are the tectonic plates which grind against one another—“I” against “it”—and produce the tension and the heat which cause the heat of burnout. Taking the time to resource and renew the “I”, to reflect daily on one’s integration in work, to go beneath the tensions by finding depth in oneself and meaning in what one does, is what nourishes and strengthens the core of personal leadership.

If my first personal lesson for leadership comes from my own struggle for finding a whole, a unity, of “I” and “it”, and my second lesson comes from an insight from Jesuit life at depth about personal renewal, my third lesson comes from working with students. For you it may come from relating to your children. You have to love students if you do what I do. You have to connect and engage with them, you have to roll with and keep up with their changes, you have to try to understand students and you have to let them know who you are. This is not easy when you are 74, as I am, and becoming the age of their grandparents.

The key here is that in every student there is a hope, an ideal, an optimism, a vision, a passion which may be buried both from us but also from them beneath layers and layers of distraction, cynicism, anger, discontent, fear, the dictates of American culture, peer pressure, uncertainties of identity, experienced lack of voice, emerging but unrealized adulthood, and sometimes serious issues of health. I have learned you have to accept them as they are, respect them for who they are, on a daily basis renew your love of them for who they are, and always speak to and appeal to that hope, that light, that ideal, that vision, that good heart hidden within them.

I had an occasion this year to speak with 15 seniors who invited me to talk with them about how I discern important decisions. In the course of this conversation I asked them—because it is essential to true discernment in the Jesuit tradition—“I take it that each of you wants to be present to the truth of yourself in silence?” This comment was met by their silence, till two of them, speaking for the others, said, “We are told that when we are present to the truth of ourselves in silence we will find peace; instead what we find is anxiety.” That single sentence is the most important and disturbing one I heard all this past year. Nothing equals it. It touches the very heart of what I most of all want to be about for students, to help them to discern their life choices, in depth, from the truth of themselves, from peaceful and assured possession of themselves.

Certainly the omnipresent and omnipotent distractions and overload of technology has much to do with this lack of presence to themselves, but so too does the society, the country, the world, the culture they live within. Sherry Turkle in her book Reclaiming Conversation says that over the past ten years the measures of empathy in college students has declined by 40%. Empathy is the ability to put yourself into the shoes of another, to imagine how life feels for them, to care for what others experience. She claims this decline of empathy comes from a greatly decreased capacity and practice of conversation which is the matrix in which we learn empathy.

I do not have the answers to this concern. What I have is a deep feeling of compassion for them. I believe that what I and all of us need most of all in our personal leadership is precisely empathy, or more widely and fully, compassion. This is why the example of the Jesuit Pope Francis is so important not just for me or for Catholics but for so many others, a Pope of mercy, of compassion. At the age of 17 he experienced the mercy of God and that is why he is who he is today. Perhaps we and our students so stand for justice—as we should do—that we fail to equally stand for its needed twin with its various names: mercy, compassion, humaneness, empathy, simple care, kindness.

I suppose you could say that this third lesson of personal leadership from my experience as a university president is that as we need to go to our own hearts to find the renewing sources of our full leadership, so we need to go to the hearts of those to whom we are dedicated and whom we wish to serve and must have the patience and the care to believe in and to relate to their hearts with our kindness and our compassion. The lesson here for all of us as leaders is to never give up on believing in and appealing to the hope, the light, in others, no matter how much it may seem to be buried or hidden.

I started my talk to you today saying it was “A Jesuit University President’s Personal Lessons on Leadership”. I realize as I have progressed that it could just as well have been more simply titled

“Integrated Leadership” or “Sustainable Leadership”. My last lesson ties in with this integration, wraps it up, and provides what I think is an important complementary dimension.

My conviction from experience, both reflecting on my own and watching others, is that it is absolutely necessary for leaders to confront their ego, especially the greater their responsibilities or position. The danger is that if people see you as important and treat you as important you begin to think you are important. If people pay more attention to your voice and your ideas than to others, you begin to think your voice is exceptional and your ideas the best. A great danger for all leaders is grandiosity and exceptionalism. I believe, in fact, that if this is not directly confronted with the help of others, inevitably the ego of leaders become inflated and they become grandiose and begin—with disastrous consequences—to believe they are an exception to the norms which apply to all people. I see this frequently in others and I have experienced continually in myself the need to confront my ego, to not let it run away with the attention, the deference, the position.

One weekend morning driving back from my customary walk around Green Lake—where I take my mind for a spin, let it roam freely the way you take a dog for a walk—I came up behind a car at a stop light with a bumper sticker which read “Don’t believe everything you think.” None of us is aware enough where our thoughts, our ideas, come from, how much they are not really our own but are our culture thinking its thoughts through us. “Don’t believe everything you think.” Leaders, in particular, because others pay more attention to what they think, are particularly blind about themselves—both what they think as being really their own and who they really are. Leaders, “Don’t believe everything you think” either your ideas about things or your ideas about yourself.

What I have found is that we really need others to wrest us out of the groove of our self-estimation and ideas. I use, and I strongly recommend for any leader with major responsibilities, regular therapy with someone who can help us see ourselves more objectively, more truly. I also find it is vital to get out of one’s social class and situation and into the lives of others quite different from ours. Be with the homeless, speak to them, look them in the eye, touch them. Go to a prison and be with people whose life seems sucked out of them. Get to know personally undocumented immigrants and their fears and hopes. Go to a food pantry and hand out food and speak with humbled, shamed, moms and dads. Spend time at a community house of people with Down Syndrome and hear their simple hopes and cries for love. Listen to students or your own children and let them dismantle your ego, your grandiosity, your importance, your self-estimation, your assurance about what you think. Visit another country and find the deep humanity and happiness of people with so much less than you. The antidote to the ego is the reality of the other. They hold the key to opening the door to that “Don’t believe everything you think.” Learning this is an important lever for the true growth of lived leadership, and one of its hardest but most rewarding lessons.

Four simple lessons: 1) The core of leadership is the integration of the “I” and the “it”; 2) the leader must find her or his unique sources of self-renewal; 3) always appeal to the hidden hope in others; and, 4) enter the lives of others to counteract your ego and to learn what you really think and are. When I list out these lessons of leadership like this, they indeed seem simple, like four chapters in a handbook Fr. Steve’s Lessons on Leadership! But leadership is one of the most personal of all human realities and its real lessons are always in the richness of one’s experience,

in the truth of that experience, in the blessing and the grace of that truth. I thank God daily for giving me the opportunity to serve as president of Seattle University these twenty years and hopefully to have something to give from my experience as a help for the leadership of others, especially as today, my fellow Rotarian leaders.