In a world awash with excellent leadership tomes (the writings of Jim Collins and William George are personal favorites), my thoughts on this topic may be of little added value. Nevertheless, twenty-six years in the university presidency and another ten working with university leaders provides a perspective I gladly share. Seven leadership lessons learned over the decades follow:

1. Get Good People.

From my perspective the most important leadership task is to identify and retain men and women of talent, temperament and commitment. This task overshadows all others. In the words of a former colleague, Dero Downing, “Get good people and good things will happen.”

Every president I have known agrees with this call, yet many do not move beyond rhetoric. In some instances colleagues become smitten with a candidate and neglect to make (note I did not use the phrase “ask others to make”) reference calls—particularly to colleagues. In other instances, especially after presidential action removing a vice president, dean or coach, presidents abdicate their responsibility to search committees. While there is immediate gratification in giving friends of the aggrieved a role in the selection process, presidents often back away from the selection process and find themselves saddled with candidates not of their preference. Presidents should be truly engaged with the search committee. Leaders fail to recognize that the judgment of others on a personnel dismissal is often deferred until a successor is chosen and evaluated. “Get good people” is measured by outcomes, not processes.

2. Establish a Decision-Making Framework.

A multitude of decisions are made throughout the university—mostly outside the offices of the president and provost. By default the framework for most of those decisions is based on authority. The question too often asked is “who should make this decision,” rather than “how should this decision be made.” In unionized campuses struggles unfold as to who should have the authority (“power”) to decide what question. And even on non-unionized campuses, reoccurring disagreements focus on what authority does this office or person or senate have.

I have long favored, and have had success (in some instances limited, in others extensive) with a decision-making framework built around the concept of “expertise.” This approach identifies

“Get good people” is measured by outcomes, not processes.
the individual or team of individuals best capable of understanding an issue and asking this party to recommend a proposed solution or resolution. That proposal in turn needs to be shared with a) those who will be affected by the decision, and b) those who must implement it—for their reactions and recommendations. Frequently, a clear consensus emerges; in other instances, the expert revises the proposal to accommodate concerns that have been raised. Granted, there will be instances when no consensus emerges or an impasse develops, at which the issue of who has the authority to decide resurfaces. But throughout the campus, that should be the exception, not the norm.


It is with some trepidation that I cite former President Richard Nixon as a guru on leadership, especially since he so frequently violated his own axioms. However, his message is on target. Presidents should focus on “big” decisions, especially those that only the president has the standing to make. I wish I had followed this maxim early in my career, but I did not appreciate the fact that one is a more effective leader the fewer decisions one makes. Not only do excellent presidents empower the rest of the university, they are in an excellent position to promote collaboration and are better prepared to address those “big decisions” which are usually complex in nature and pervasive in impact.


In the life of every institution, there will be times when the president must make changes. The impetus may be serious financial challenges, a mandate from the governing board or chancellor, a structural reorganization, or a front-page scandal.

A mentor and friend, Leonard Nelson, impressed on me the importance of deciding early on whether the necessary surgery will be minor or major. If it is minor, Len elaborated, the president’s primary concern should be the health of the patient (the University proper). Primary attention should be given to minimizing discomfort, facilitating recovery and achieving normalcy. On the other hand, Len noted, if major surgery is called the primary consideration, then it is critical to “get out” all that needs to be excised in one operation. Universities recover from endogenous shock far better than bleeding to death over a prolonged period. I think this lesson has special relevance during today’s financial crises affecting many campuses.

5. Watch the Pennies.

Decades have passed since the Secretary of Finance in my native state of Kentucky told his governor, “You watch the dollars, and I’ll watch the pennies.” In these days of unfathomable deficits and trillion dollar recovery plans, the penny is an anachronism. Yet the principle behind watching the pennies still applies. The successful president focuses on the big picture, on the alignment of university resources and policies in pursuit of the university’s strategic goals, on the solicitation of gifts and grants, and the acquisition of state appropriations and capital construction funds. Yet, someone who has the president’s trust needs to monitor the legality and propriety of fund expenditures throughout the institution. The imprudent use of funds, much less the illegal use, can threaten a president’s tenure or so erode public confidence that the presidency becomes little more than an apparition. During presidential tenures imprudent expenditures ranging from excessive spending on presidential manses to personal use of chicken manure from the University farm, have ended presidential careers. Inappropriate financial machinations have likewise imperiled colleagues. A strong internal audit operation is the president’s best friend. And if problems are found in an audit, dig deeper. As Warren Buffet, the Oracle of Omaha, observed, he had...
never found only one cockroach.

A final thought is in order. Despite all efforts there will be thefts, corruption and as I once endured, five-figure embezzlements. There is no safeproofing mechanism to overcome human venality. The president should respond forcefully when problems are identified, setting the tone for integrity in all operations, and clearly communicating support for the penny watchers.


I can still recall high school speech classes highlighted by repeated, and at times, laborious efforts to enunciate correctly. Those exercises are a fitting analogy to the president’s responsibility to inform the public of and persuade the academy to support the directions taken by the university. The lesson learned is that, with rare exception, only the president has the standing and gravitas to communicate the institution’s values and strategic directions.

No leader can fully respond to the time-consuming expectations of faculty and staff for “communications” because the request is really for the president’s ear, not his tongue. The president, nevertheless, is the voice of the institution.

That voice is critically important in times of crises when the leader is expected to enumerate where the university stands and why. When presidents, including myself, have forgotten that charge, their effectiveness is questioned.

“He came with one foot in the stirrup.”

In blunt terms, a candidate who is not willing to make a professional and personal commitment to an institution should withdraw from the selection process. If a president finds once in office that he/she cannot make the necessary commitment to the university, exit planning should commence. Every university expects and deserves the love of its leader.

I conclude these comments as I began them, acknowledging the extensive scholarship on leadership available to readers. Yet in the main that scholarship addresses the rational dimension of organizational leadership. My experiences and observations also point to the emotional dimension of leadership. The perception that the leader truly loves the place he/she leads is crucial to a successful presidency.

No leader is right on every decision, and there will always be those ready to pounce on one crippled by politics or mistakes. The enduring lesson in my eyes is that the president who is perceived as acting with integrity, loving the University and genuinely caring for the people who work and study there, will command sustained support and loyalty. The president who is perceived as acting with integrity, loving the University and genuinely caring for the people who work and study there, will command sustained support and loyalty.

7. Love the Place.

Presidents have the same vulnerabilities as faculty and staff. At various points in their careers they prefer to be elsewhere. The president does not have the option of expressing that sentiment—and the truth be told—cannot hide it. In every institution, irrespective of its location or circumstances, there are people who love that campus and carefully eye the president (and often the spouse) in order to judge whether there is a personal commitment to the institution. And the judgment they reach shapes campus and public opinion. As a former colleague observed about a new president (who was brilliant, but not really successful in his brief tenure),

I conclude these comments as I began them, acknowledging the extensive scholarship on leadership available to readers. Yet in the main that scholarship addresses the rational dimension of organizational leadership. My experiences and observations also point to the emotional dimension of leadership. The perception that the leader truly loves the place he/she leads is crucial to a successful presidency.

No leader is right on every decision, and there will always be those ready to pounce on one crippled by politics or mistakes. The enduring lesson in my eyes is that the president who is perceived as acting with integrity, loving the University and genuinely caring for the people who work and study there, will command sustained support and loyalty. The president who is perceived as acting with integrity, loving the University and genuinely caring for the people who work and study there, will command sustained support and loyalty.

A long and successful presidential tenure is both fulfilling to the chosen leader and salutary for the fortunate university.