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LEADING TO LEARN

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Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

A Collaborative Syllabus for
Higher Education Leadership

Edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher

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CHAPTER 9

Lessons Learned about Leadership

Duane Roen, *Arizona State University*

*“Some of the most important qualities you may have been born with or you can develop are humility, empathy, resilience, self-awareness, self-reflection, the ability to communicate, and the willingness to take a risk because the ambition for the greater good has become more important for you than the ambition for yourself.”—Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Leadership Journey* (Goodwin 2005, 5)*

There is no shortage of books, articles, podcasts, blogs, vlogs, and professional development seminars on leadership in a wide range of fields. Some of them—such as Goodwin’s—resonate with what I have learned to value; some don’t. Although some of what I’ve learned about leadership appears in these kinds of sources, I have learned much more by listening to the words and watching the behaviors of people. I have observed how others have responded to those words and behaviors—much as Aristotle did when he crafted *Rhetoric* (Aristotle 1932). That is, for decades I have engaged in a form of participant-observation ethnography (Whitehead 2005) in which I have learned from the groups that I have been a member of and/or interacting with. My observations have moved back and forth along a continuum with “covert” at one end and “overt” at the other. That is, sometimes people didn’t realize that I was making mental notes or even written notes on their behavior. At other times they did know that I was reflecting on their behavior because I commented on it and asked them about it. However, I realize that humans should be aware that

others are observing—and learning from—human behavior whenever that behavior is on display. People notice what others do and say.

As I reflect on what I have learned, I draw on my forty-five years of experience in higher education as a teacher and an administrator at large research universities, with roles including program director, department chair, college dean, campus vice provost, and faculty senate president. During those years, I interacted with and observed colleagues; students; administrators at every level in the university; business, government, and educational leaders; and many members of the general public. From engaging with these people, I observed all the leadership qualities that I write about in this chapter. I also draw on my five years of teaching high school English and leading a group of K-12 language arts teachers in Wisconsin in the 1970s, where I learned from supervisors, fellow teachers, students, parents, and other members of the community in which I lived. Further, I draw on my experience growing up on a Wisconsin dairy farm, where leadership skills were expected at an early age. Finally, I draw on volunteer work teaching memoir writing in men’s and women’s prisons in Arizona since 2022. Incarcerated women and men inspire me with their resilience and their commitments to helping others. When I reflect on what I have learned from all of these people, I am overwhelmed by how much they have enriched my life with invaluable lessons. I am fortunate to have had such positive mentors and role models.

I also am grateful for a resource that has helped me hundreds of times—the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, which “studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society.” By frequently using their resources, I have come to appreciate that learning to be a leader is also about learning to “foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society” (Greater Good Science Center, n.d.).

The following list of lessons is by no means complete—I frequently talk to groups about more than thirty leadership lessons that I have learned. The list here focuses on the leadership qualities that I value

most, and I realize that some readers of this chapter may not share my perspectives. My list also exemplifies Kenneth Gergen's (1991) observation that "persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction" (7). That is, my list may change a few more times before my life comes to a close because as Gergen further notes, "Each reality of self gives way to reflection, questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality" (7). I realize that this is anecdotal, but in those conversations, participants have frequently shared stories about how these leadership characteristics resonate with their experiences in a range of organizations. Further, when I have interviewed candidates for senior leadership positions, they have frequently talked about their own commitments to these characteristics.

If I were to synthesize the lessons into a single statement, it would be this: "How we treat people matters." During my life, no one has done more than Fred Rogers to raise my awareness of this principle. When my children were small from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, I watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* with them when I could, and in every episode, in his gentle way, Fred Rogers showed millions of people, including me, how to treat others. And in the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (Heller 2019), we see the power of how Fred Rogers treated others. An acquaintance of mine lived in Fred Rogers' real-life neighborhood in Pittsburgh. When I asked him what Fred Rogers was like in his daily life, my acquaintance smiled as he said, "The same as he is on his TV show."

With that in mind, I offer the following:

Lesson One: We should all be leaders every day of our lives.

Leadership is not tied to a job title—or to any job, for that matter. For organizations and communities to function effectively, every member of any organization or community can contribute to that functionality by engaging in the kinds of behaviors described in the lessons outlined in this chapter. That community could be a group of people in a business, a college or university, a unit within a college or university, a classroom,

professional organization, a playground, or some other place where individuals work, learn, play, or engage in other activities.

I've learned this lesson—that we should be leaders every day of our lives—many times over in my life, from both negative and positive models. On the negative side, I have too often seen the adverse consequences when people have not taken needed action because they have thought that someone with more authority should do what needs to be done or because they were not able to muster the courage to do what needed to be done. On the positive side, I have witnessed instances when people of all ages, including children, have stepped forward to make others feel welcomed, included, valued, respected, and that they belong. And I have seen how these words and deeds have made others feel.

Lesson Two: Every organization and community benefits from having effective leaders at every level in the organizational chart.

Too often, people think that those who reside higher in an organization's org chart will provide the leadership that will make the organization function well. Although it is necessary for people higher in the organization to exhibit the qualities, characteristics, and behaviors described in this chapter, their leadership alone is not sufficient for effective functioning. There is a multiplier or synergistic effect when others in the organization—the more the merrier—engage in these ways.

I have learned this lesson in a wide range of organizations. For example, when I grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin in the 1950s, everyone, regardless of age, was expected to take responsibility to make certain that all the farm tasks got done—especially during the planting and harvest seasons. Likewise, when we farm kids were in a 4-H club, every member of the club was expected to pitch in to make the organization function. And now that I'm a member of a local branch of the NAACP, I see what can be accomplished when rank-and-file members serve on committees, staff tables at public events, and

volunteer for other work that needs to be done. Of course, this lesson was reinforced every day when I worked at Arizona State University, where I saw so many students, staff, and faculty step up to make certain that the institution was making a difference in the lives of students and community members.

Lesson Three: Effective leaders listen with empathy and act with compassion.

To develop empathy, we need to listen to others so that we can learn more about how they have experienced life. On the basis of empathy, we can then act with compassion to respond in ways that are helpful to others. Isabel Wilkerson emphasizes that empathy needs to be “radical” if it is to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others:

Radical empathy... means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.

Empathy is no substitute for the experience itself. We don't get to tell a person with a broken leg or a bullet wound that they are not in pain. And people who have hit the caste lottery are not in a position to tell a person who has suffered under the tyranny of caste what is offensive or hurtful or demeaning to those at the bottom. The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly. And the least that a person in the dominant caste can do is not make the pain any worse. (Wilkerson 2023, 386)

I'm going to be vague in describing a moment when this lesson was driven home vividly for me. I am frequently haunted by the memory. After a fire destroyed the barn on my family's dairy farm when I was in eighth grade, I went to work on neighborhood farms. One day on one of these farms, another hired-hand teenager was horsing around with the owner's young son as we were relaxing on the lawn after lunch. As the two of them were playing, the other teenager inadvertently scratched the owner's son's back with his fingernail. When the son went crying to his father, the father asked what had happened. The other teenager explained that he had accidentally scratched the son as they were running around. When the farmer asked me to confirm that, I stood there silently. The other teenager lost his job because I failed to act with the empathy and compassion that the moment called for. I learned from that incident, but I am still haunted by it.

Lesson Four: Effective leaders value, embrace, and practice humility.

Humility comes in many forms, but one that matters a great deal is intellectual humility, understanding that I as an individual don't know all that I need to know. Worthington et al. note the importance of humility in building community:

In fact, humility—with its emphasis on accurate self-perception, modest self-portrayal, and other-oriented relational stance, as well as a penchant for showing up (or hiding) when egos are strained—is at the core of a cluster of virtues that bind society together, including love, compassion, forgiveness, altruism, generosity, gratitude, and empathy. All of those virtues have at their base the other-orientedness that is facilitated by humility. (Worthington et al. 2017, 3)

Without intellectual humility, we don't learn very much, and for people in higher education, that is particularly ironic.

When I was growing up on the dairy farm, I learned every day that intellectual humility is not only desirable but also essential. Because I was given adult responsibilities on the farm when I was six years old, I encountered problems to be solved every day. In some cases, I figured out the solutions on my own—e.g., find the right wood screw in the workshop to secure that hinge. In many more cases, though, I lacked the experience to puzzle through the problem, so I had to ask my dad or my farmer uncles how to repair a machine or how to help a sick animal. Seeking the knowledge of others became a way of life.

The importance of intellectual humility was probably most salient to me when I worked with a wide range of business owners and local government leaders in my role as vice provost of Arizona State University's (ASU) Polytechnic campus. Listening to them share their experiences in the world outside the academy did much to help me understand how educational institutions can more effectively support students as they prepare for their careers. I learned that academics don't know all that they need to know about the world outside the academy.

Since 2005, I have facilitated more than a thousand workshops (333 last year alone) in which participants discuss and write about life experiences. I offer these workshops in libraries, community centers, retirement communities, life-long learning programs, schools, and in both men's and women's prisons in Arizona, mostly in the Phoenix area. In facilitating these workshops, I have come to realize that I am learning much more from the participants than they are learning from me as we talk about a wide range of life's experiences. And I think that it's important to note that I have learned the most from incarcerated men and women because they—especially the women—have experienced life in ways that I have not. I tell all the workshop participants that I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from them at this stage in my life. I also thank them for supporting one another when their stories evoke strong emotions and tears in all of us.

Lesson Five: Effective leaders seek and value ideas from everyone in the organization.

With humility in hand, leaders see and value ideas from everyone in the organization—the department, the college, the institution. It took me a while to learn that lesson. Early in my career, I sought ideas from those whom I considered “in the know.” However, that often yielded fairly modest lists of ideas. It took me a while to learn what Bill Nye the Science Guy observes: “Everyone you will ever meet knows something you don't” (Nye 2014). It can be a challenge to listen to ideas from people in organizations or communities with different ideas and even a bigger hurdle to take them seriously or to avoid responding defensively. However, Monica Guzman suggests that a productive way to respond is to be consistently curious and to say, “I never thought of it that way” (Guzman 2022, 57). We also need to add, “Tell me more.” This response demonstrates intellectual humility and lets people know that we value a wide range of perspectives, as well as the people who offer those perspectives.

Lesson Six: Effective leaders value and practice effective communication.

Once there is consensus about priorities and goals for the organization, people need frequent reminders so that the priorities and goals aren't neglected. For example, Arizona State University's charter is a mantra that guides the work of faculty, staff, and administrators: “ASU is a comprehensive public research university, measured not by whom we exclude, but rather by whom we include and how they succeed; advancing research and discovery of public value; and assuming fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities it serves” (Arizona State University Charter, n.d.).

ASU's charter is omnipresent, appearing in many places on the institution's website, in public documents, in many presentations, and even on granite monuments on each of ASU's four campuses in the Phoenix area. Because the charter is invoked so frequently (I did so

multiple times each day when I was a dean and vice provost), most ASU employees know it and can explain its impact. I appreciate the communicative power of the charter inside and outside the institution because it emphasizes ASU's commitment to making a difference in the lives of students and in the community writ large. The charter consistently made it easier for me to communicate with a wide range of stakeholders because it exemplifies the kinds of ethos and pathos that work with so many people.

Since August 2024, I have been learning more about effective communication by listening to Nick Saban, former head football coach at the University of Alabama. On ESPN's *College GameDay* each Saturday morning in the fall, he regularly talks about how he communicated with football players to help them grow as students, athletes, and citizens of the world. As I listen and learn, I understand why he was so successful as a coach. He understands the impact of the words that he uses, and his sense of humor effectively complements those words when that is what's needed. Saban also consistently exemplifies the other characteristics that I describe in this chapter. And as I watch more YouTube videos of press conferences with ASU head football coach Kenny Dillingham, who was hired for the position at the age of 32, I increasingly value how he communicates with players and with just about everyone else in the world, for that matter. And his early-career success speaks for itself.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020, I was a dean. I immediately scheduled two open Zoom sessions each week for any faculty or staff who wished to participate. Usually several dozen faculty and staff colleagues joined me. At the very first meeting, I learned how valuable these conversations were. Early on, the meetings focused on questions about policies, procedures, and resources related to the pandemic; often it meant that I'd explain things that may have needed further clarification, and others would share their ideas. After a while, though, the sessions included conversations about all sorts of topics related to teaching and learning, everyone's well-being, the university's sports teams, and more. I continued those twice-weekly sessions until I stepped down from serving

as a dean in June 2021. Coworkers frequently told me how much they needed this kind of communication with me and with one another.

Lesson Seven: Effective leaders strive to motivate and inspire others.

Relatively early in life, I learned about the many ways that I could be motivated and inspired. For example, when my dad affirmed the value of the work that I did on the dairy farm when I was as young as six years old, that motivated me to do more because I felt that I was making a positive difference. In school when I read books about real people and fictional characters who had made a difference in the lives of others (e.g., Lincoln, Einstein, Franklin, Antigone), those stories inspired me, and they still do. When I watched the Harlem Globetrotters as a child, their athletic skills and their joy inspired me. And when I listened to people who talked about their experiences, I learned that they too were motivated and inspired in diverse ways. When I think about the people who have motivated and inspired me along the way, they are people who treated me and others in ways that are consistent with the leadership characteristics that I describe in this chapter.

A common method for motivating people is to praise their ideas and service—to compliment them for performance. However, as sports psychologist Stephen Rollnick observes, praise has limitations because it is “a judgment you pass down” on performance. Because performance varies from one event to another, praise often varies too, which can affect self-esteem—both positively and negatively. But as Rollnick observes:

Affirmation, on the other hand, occurs when you acknowledge something inside the player that's already there, which cannot be taken away, like shining a light on something positive that you've noticed. It's something for them to notice too, take ownership of and be inspired by. If praise is a judgment you pass down, affirmation is something you notice, an observation you share, about

positive things in their performance, ability, attitude or behaviour that they can take ownership of and can feel proud about. (Rollnick n.d.)

Another way to motivate and inspire is to remind members of the organization why their work is important. For example, for those of us who work in secondary and postsecondary education, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics each year provides data that reminds us why our work makes a difference in the lives of students. There is a table on the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website that vividly indicates the correlation between greater educational attainment, higher earnings, and lower rates of unemployment. In recent years, I have shared these data with colleagues and with the public. Every time I have done so, other people in the room have chimed in with comments that indicate how the data have inspired them to help students complete some form of postsecondary education, including vocational education.

Lesson Eight: Effective leaders understand their weaknesses and work to overcome them.

To understand our weaknesses, we need to be self-aware and reflective. Developing self-awareness is not always easy because we often are so busy living life that it can be difficult to find time to engage in reflection: “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitute reflective thought” (Dewey 1933, 9). However, as Kathleen Blake Yancey explains, reflection is formative:

To reflect, as to learn, we set a problem for ourselves, we try to conceptualize that problem from diverse perspectives—the scientific and the spontaneous—for it is in seeing something from divergent perspectives that we see it more fully. Along the way, we check and confirm, as we seek

to reach goals that we have set for ourselves. Reflection becomes a habit of mind, one that transforms. (Yancey 1998, 12)

If we seek role models for being aware of their weaknesses, Abraham Lincoln surfaces for me. In *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin describes how “Lincoln possessed an uncanny understanding of his shifting moods, a profound self-awareness that enabled him to find constructive ways to alleviate sadness and stress” (Goodwin 2005, xvii).

When I was a child, I don’t think that I was all that self-aware of how I was treating people. As a result, I think that I sometimes treated people well in the ways that I value today. However, I think that I sometimes did not treat people as well as I should have. By the time I was a teenager, though, I learned what it meant to treat people well even if I didn’t always translate that learning into words and actions. Later in life, I developed the habit of reflecting on experience each day. That is, since October of 1978, my wife, Maureen, and I have written in a daily journal, and now (January 2025) we have written more than 21,000 pages of journal entries. The entries focus a lot on our experiences with our children, grandchildren, and other family members, but they also include details about what’s happening in the world that day. As we write these daily narratives, I think about my role in each narrative. I frequently think about what I learned from the day’s experiences and how I can do things more thoughtfully next time. Incidentally, keeping a daily journal is a gift to the journal writer and to future generations. When I read an entry from forty-five years ago, it brings back a flood of details about that day.

Lesson Nine: Effective leaders strive to develop their emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is “the ability to manage both your own emotions and understand the emotions of people around you. There are five key elements to EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills” (Mental Health America n.d.). Emotional

intelligence entails a fairly complex constellation of characteristics and skills, which explains why it can be so challenging to develop. It requires the same kinds of reflection and introspection needed to understand one's own strengths and weaknesses.

In leadership roles, as elsewhere in life, emotional intelligence is essential. It helps leaders to avoid letting their own perspectives overshadow or overwhelm the perspectives of others, and that helps to foster a culture in which others in the organization feel valued, which can enhance morale and collaboration (Cole, Cox, and Stavos 2016). In my own experience, I have seen how underdeveloped emotional intelligence can negatively affect working relationships to the point where people dread working with the individual. A vivid example stands out for me. During my second year of teaching in a high school, my Grandpa Roen passed away. When I asked my supervisor for a personal-leave day to be a pallbearer for Grandpa, he said, "A grandparent isn't close enough to you to warrant a personal-leave day." Of course, he did not ask me how emotionally close I was to Grandpa Roen, someone whom I had spent much time with for more than two decades and with whom I had lived for a year when I was in college. My response to my supervisor was, "I'm going to Grandpa's funeral. Dock my pay if you need to."

I have sensed growth in my own emotional intelligence as it has evolved during the last five decades, and that has helped me do the administrative work that has come my way in my career. That is, I have increasingly thought about "self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills" (Mental Health America). For example, early in my career, if someone expressed anger toward me, I sometimes responded in kind. Along the way, though, I learned that responding to anger with anger was almost always counterproductive—it did not produce any positive results. I learned to be more aware of what I was thinking and feeling at the moment and what kind of response would lead to the results that were needed.

Lesson Ten: Effective leaders have a sense of humor and know how to laugh at themselves.

Humor and laughter have many benefits. The Mayo Clinic, for example, notes that in the short run laughter simulates many of the body's organs, reduces stress, and relieves tension. In the long run, laughter enhances the immune system, reduces pain, helps deal with difficult situations, and improves one's mood. Because of these benefits, Mayo suggests, "Find a way to laugh about your own situations.... It does your body good" (Mayo Clinic 2023). The US Department of Veterans Affairs (2024) also notes these and many other ways that humor and laughter affect our well-being.

My favorite example of laughing at yourself occurred during the semi-final game of the NCAA's women's Final Four game between Texas and South Carolina on Friday, April 4, 2025. Bree Hall, South Carolina's star player, turned to run down the court and fell on her behind. When she got up, she laughed heartily at herself, and her coach, Dawn Staley, joined in laughing with her. Hall's response to falling down reassured everyone that she was not injured; it also was a moment of wonderful comic relief in an intensely competitive game.

When I learned to laugh at myself, especially in front of students and colleagues, I saw the ways that it affected my working relationships with them. When others have laughed with me, it has helped them feel more comfortable around me; they have told me that. For example, I have to work very hard to remember names. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, one of the benefits of teaching via Zoom in the spring of that year was that all the students' names were right there in front of me. I was overjoyed. However, that fall, faculty were back in the classroom, and students could choose whether to be in the classroom or on Zoom. By spring 2021, students were all back in the classroom, but everyone wore a mask. For several years, my method for learning students' names had been to make their roster photos into flash cards with their names on the backs of the photos. I would carry the photos in my pocket and review them many times each day until I had learned all the names. However, when everyone was wearing

masks, the photos did not match the faces that I saw in the classroom. My solution was to use a felt-tipped pen to draw masks on every photo. It worked! When I shared this with my students and with colleagues, I laughed at myself for needing to use the flash cards and to draw masks on them, and everyone laughed with me because they understood how hard I was working to learn their names.

Lesson Eleven: Effective leaders know when to say, “I’m sorry. I made a mistake.”

Last time I checked, all humans make mistakes. When we make a mistake, others in our organization know that we made a mistake. When we don’t acknowledge the mistake, they will infer that we were either unaware that we made the mistake or that we are hoping that no one noticed. Which is better for one’s ethos—being perceived as being clueless or being perceived as dishonest? That’s a tough call. However, when we acknowledge that we made a mistake, our ethos benefits. People see us as self-aware, as honest, as human. If it is a mistake that negatively affects others, we of course need to make it right. We also need to apologize and let others know what we have learned from the experience. Kendra Cherry notes that “[e]veryone makes mistakes, and looking at them with humor can make them easier to cope with” (Cherry 2022).

At the beginning of each of the hundreds of writing workshops I facilitate, I quickly make a seating chart with the first names of participants so that I can use their first names during the session. For the people who have been participating in my workshops regularly for as long as fifteen years, I know their names. However, for people who started participating only a few months ago in monthly workshops, I have a very difficult time matching names with faces. That bothers me because when they greet me by name when they enter the room, I can’t reciprocate. And when I make the seating chart, I sometimes need to ask them to remind me what their names are. This really bothers me at the prisons because the men and women have told me how much they appreciate being addressed by their first names. My solution is to apologize to the whole group for not remembering some of their names, and then I make a self-effacing

joke about my memory. The group laughs, and we move on. They realize that I have a shortcoming, but they know that I care enough about them to work to overcome the shortcoming.

Lesson Twelve: Effective leaders strive to make people feel valued, supported, respected, and that they belong. They foster a culture of care.

I begin by noting that effective leaders are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, I have learned that using the words *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* to describe that commitment can be counter-productive in some settings. As evidence, I point to enacted anti-DEI legislation in states such as Florida, Texas, and Iowa (Martinez-Alvarado and Perez 2023). However, in my conversations with a range of stakeholders, people more readily embrace the idea that we should foster environments in which everyone in the organization feels welcomed, valued, supported, respected, and that they belong. This has reinforced the lesson that I learned earlier in life and in my rhetorical education: The words we choose matter.

Michael Crow, president of Arizona State University, has modeled what it means to make certain that people feel welcomed, valued, supported, respected, and that they belong. He has steadfastly led the institution by fostering a culture of care. As noted earlier in this chapter, the ASU charter is a reminder that we must stay focused on a culture of care for students and the community. At the annual LIFT (Listen, Invest, Facilitate, Teach) Summit at ASU in 2024, President Crow summed up the institution’s commitment: “We are still looking for more ways to follow the golden rule in the way we run this institution. No one will be left out for any reason, because the sum of us is too important” (quoted in Faller 2024). I will add that President Crow’s comments and his decades of work also demonstrate that he advocates that we follow the platinum rule—that we treat students and the community as they want to be treated.

Lesson Thirteen: Effective leaders muster the courage to do the right thing even when it is not easy.

Courage is the ability to overcome fear to take action. It entails being able to face situations that we perceive to be harmful or dangerous. When Aristotle reflects on courage in *Nicomachean Ethics*, he notes some of what we fear in life: “disgrace, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death” (Aristotle 1973, 1115a, 10–14), and he explains why those fears are not insurmountable and why we need to consider them in light of a higher purpose. I learned to overcome the fear of death when I was in eighth grade. In January of 1963, our dairy barn burned to the ground. As soon as we realized that the fire could not be extinguished, we flew into action to get the cattle out of the burning building. We opened all the stanchions and the exterior barn doors so that the cows could get out. However, in the confusion of all that was happening so quickly, there wasn’t time to ask my dad whether all the calf pens had been opened. Without hesitation, I ran into the burning barn to make certain that the calves could get out. While I was doing that, the barn filled with smoke so dense that I could not see my own hands in front of me. Fortunately, I knew the barn so well that I was able to feel my way along the walls to get to an exterior door. Along the way, though, that journey was challenging because cows kept running into me as they were escaping. I almost did not make it out of the building. After that incident, I felt more confident that I could overcome other kinds of fears.

People in leadership positions sometimes need to make decisions in situations that seem difficult to navigate. For example, there are situations in which a colleague’s actions are harmful to others in the organization. Title IX violations fall into this category. When dealing with a Title IX case, institutional policies usually determine what happens in situations when there is a Title IX violation. Therefore, the supervisor of the person who engages in the violation doesn’t determine the outcome of the case. However, the supervisor participates in the case in one way or another. For example, the supervisor may be required to sign a letter terminating employment.

In other cases, there may not be a legal requirement to terminate employment, but the supervisor understands how a colleague’s words and actions are harmful to others in the organization. In those cases, it can be difficult to muster the courage to do what is in the best interest of the organization and other people in the organization. In a case where a colleague needs to leave the organization, the stress level rises, and the easier way out may be to ignore the individual’s harmful behavior. However, ignoring the behavior will result in ongoing harm to others in the organization.

Leading up to the moment that a colleague’s employment is terminated, the supervisor can feel considerable stress and even the fear that “I’m ruining this person’s career.” The moment when a supervisor informs a colleague that employment is ending can be very difficult. However, in the days and weeks after the supervisor has informed the colleague, the stress and fear give way to a sense of “I’ve done the right thing for the organization and others in the organization.” And even though personnel actions need to remain confidential, others in the organization will notice the absence of the person who has caused harm. That realization will do much for morale in the organization, and enhanced morale will benefit the organization in many ways. In cases that I addressed, the harm was usually caused by some form of harassment.

In other situations, finding courage can be even more difficult—e.g., challenging the ideas of someone higher in the organizational chart. The same principle applies, though: do what will benefit the organization and others in the organization.

Lesson Fourteen: Effective leaders foster resilience in themselves and in others.

Resilience is “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress” (American Psychological Association 2012/2020). Because I have had cancer twice and because cancer has taken the lives of so many loved ones in my life, I feel that I have a responsibility to encourage others to get recommended

cancer screenings. However, I also use my experience with cancer to reflect on my own resilience and to help others think about the ways that they can find/develop the resilience that they need.

When I was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2014, I had surgery and then moved on with my life. When I was diagnosed with mouth cancer in 2017, I thought, “I’ve been down this road before. No big deal.” However, I quickly learned that where the cancer is in your body makes a big difference, and I have frequently laughed at myself for being so naïve. In 2017, I had two surgeries, six chemo treatments, and thirty-two radiation treatments. I lost more than forty pounds. There were days when I thought that I would not see the next day. There were also days when I did not want to see the next day. I would not wish my experience on anyone else, but I don’t regret that I had to go through it because I learned much about my body, about medicine, and especially about resilience.

After I had recovered from the two surgeries, the radiation and chemo treatments began. In preparation for the thirty-two radiation treatments, the clinic staff made a plastic mesh mask that fit the shape of my head. They did that by heating the mask and stretching it to fit my face and head tightly. Because some patients feel claustrophobic when the mask is bolted down to the table, the clinic’s staff asked whether I wanted to be sedated. I declined the offer, but I realized that I needed to do something to distract myself from focusing on having my head being bolted to the table. I decided to close my eyes and then name all fifty states, all the provinces of Canada, and as many European countries as needed to get through the treatments. It worked—probably because I’m so easily distracted.

The after-effects of my chemo treatments were challenging. For example, after my first treatment, I had nonstop hiccups for seven days, and for about eight weeks during and immediately after the treatments, almost all foods and beverages tasted awful, which meant that I lost more than forty pounds, which is not necessarily a bad thing. If it hadn’t been for scrambled eggs and Boost, more pounds would have flown away.

Although the after-effects of chemo were unpleasant, the chemo treatment sessions were relatively easy, albeit time-consuming—several hours for each one. I read during those treatments, but I also realized that I could engage with the other chemo-treatment patients in the room—sometimes more than twenty. My favorite form of engagement was humor, and I relished the opportunity to get patients and healthcare workers to laugh. I enjoyed that opportunity so much that I looked forward to driving to the clinic each week for chemo treatments and each day for radiation treatments. Focusing on the welfare of other patients and healthcare workers shifted my attention away from myself. That did much to activate my resilience.

When I talk to others about my resilience during that challenging time, I acknowledge that what worked for me may not work for them. But when I tell the story, others chime in with stories about their own ways of being resilient. Sharing our own stories of resilience when life is challenging helps others realize that they too can get through tough periods of life.

Lesson Fifteen: Effective leaders understand the importance of relationship-building.

Early in my career, I showed up for meetings five minutes before the start time so that I wouldn’t miss any of the discussion. However, I noticed that others were already there chatting with people in the room. It dawned on me that I was missing an opportunity to engage personally with other people in the room, so I began to show up fifteen minutes before meeting start times, and there were people already engaged in conversation. This was especially the case when, as vice provost of one of Arizona State University’s campuses, I attended many off-campus meetings with business, educational, and government leaders—sometimes several dozen each month. So I began showing up at least thirty minutes early for those meetings. By doing so, I had many opportunities to develop working relationships and friendships with a wide range of community leaders—mayors, city council members, college presidents, school superintendents, business

owners in the Phoenix area. As it turns out, I also had many opportunities in those pre-meeting conversations to explain to individuals how my university was serving students and the community. Among other things, some of those conversations were with parents of high school students who were contemplating which college to attend; in some cases those conversations resulted in recruiting students to attend my university. Those conversations were easy because I simply had to be interested in the person I was talking with.

Lesson Sixteen: Effective leaders are willing to take risks.

Early in life, I was relatively risk-averse—except for those times when my brothers and I, in our pre-teen years, floated down the Rush River near our farm in western Wisconsin each spring when the melting snow flooded the river and broke the ice into small chunks. Dressed in winter clothes, we would certainly have drowned if we had fallen off those small sheets of ice—something that our horrified parents made clear when we told them years later about what we had done as children.

Decades later, I learned how and why to take strategic risks—one of the lessons that I learned most vividly as a faculty member at Arizona State University for nearly three decades. ASU has embraced innovation wholeheartedly for more than two decades to better serve students and the public. Because of this commitment to innovation for the public good, ASU has been ranked the most innovative university in the country for nine consecutive years, beginning in 2015 (ASU News). ASU's commitment to innovation is fostered by President Michael Crow's view of risk. I have frequently heard him say that we should try new ways of serving students and the public, and if something doesn't work, we should try something else.

The most salient lessons that I learned about risk-taking came from my experience with online courses and programs. In the late 1990s, when I directed the writing program at Arizona State University, I worked with some graduate teaching associates who were eager to learn about the ways that digital technologies could enhance learning. I supported

their requests to offer sections of writing courses in classrooms equipped with a computer for every student in the room. The undergraduate students in those sections seemed to enjoy and benefit from the experience. That was a small risk that paid off.

In 2004, I was asked to move from ASU's Tempe campus to develop new courses and programs at ASU's Polytechnic campus, located on an abandoned Air Force base, Williams Field. During my first summer, faculty across a range of fields in the humanities, social sciences, and the arts offered course sections that enrolled a few hundred students. When I asked students about summer enrollments, I learned that many of them went home for the summer, and a fair number of them enrolled in summer courses at colleges near their homes. When I asked them whether they would enroll in online courses in the summer, many said that they would. As a result, I encouraged faculty to offer online summer courses, and many did. As a result, approximately sixteen hundred students enrolled—about a seven hundred percent increase over the prior summer. Not everyone was happy about what I had done that summer, but soon after that, units in other colleges started offering online course sections in the summer and then during the fall and spring semesters.

Based on what I had learned from offering summer courses, I encouraged faculty to work with me to offer online degree programs—some of the earliest online degrees at ASU. When we launched our first online program in the college, enrollment grew relatively quickly. When I talked with students in the program, they emphasized a common theme: “I work full time; my children keep me busy; and I'm engaged in my community. My only option for earning a degree is an asynchronous online program because it provides the flexible schedule that I need. I couldn't attend synchronous on-campus classes even if I lived a block from campus.” Those conversations made me realize that we must offer options that serve the needs of people who have been left behind by higher education. For some students in-person classes meet their needs; for others that option doesn't work.

In 2011, once I had become more comfortable with taking risks, I accepted an invitation from the administrator whose office supports the online programs offered by ASU's colleges— what is now named EdPlus. I was invited to work with other ASU faculty in my field to develop a low-risk first-year writing course that students could take as part of a suite of courses for Global Freshman Academy (now called Earned Admissions), an earned-admission program for students who don't automatically qualify for admission. The work was challenging, and some external critics voiced their skepticism. However, once again the risk paid off. Students who have been successful in the GFA courses have subsequently been successful after being admitted to college.

Coda

I opened this chapter with an excerpt from Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *The Leadership Journey: How Four Kids Became President* because it effectively captures the gist of what leadership is all about. My heart sang as I watched a C-SPAN2 interview with Goodwin conducted by CNN anchor Bianna Golodryga in 2024. She talked about her book, written for students in the middle grades, focusing on the childhood experiences of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson—with an emphasis on the qualities that they exhibited early and life and that shaped the way that they served in office later in life: "Some of the most important qualities you may have been born with or you can develop are humility, empathy, resilience, self-awareness, self-reflection, the ability to communicate, and the willingness to take a risk because the ambition for the greater good has become more important for you than the ambition for yourself" (Goodwin 2024, 5). I was especially excited during the interview when Goodwin noted that empathy is the most important of the qualities. My wish is that every young person in the country will read Goodwin's book so that they can see themselves as leaders every day of their lives and that they will continue to learn from and reflect on their experiences.

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