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Why Leadership Matters

by Susan J. Hunter

The following is from a talk University of Maine President Dr. Susan J. Hunter gave on May 30, 2018, at Bangor Public Library as part of Dirigo Speaks. President Hunter feels her time at UMaine has allowed her many opportunities to reflect on leadership and why it matters and recognizes that many people have shaped her perspectives on leadership. More information about this and other Dirigo Speaks presentations is available on the Bangor Daily News website (<https://bangordailynews.com/browse/bdnevents/dirigospeaks/>).

If asked, I think most people would say that they know a leader when they see one. That person with the highest—and sometimes longest—title. The occupant of the corner office. The loudest voice or highest paid.

But I'm drawn to a different definition of leadership. In that definition, leadership is derived from influence and can come from anyone at any level, in any role. This leadership doesn't rely on prominence of position, but, rather people who are considered wise, thoughtful, and responsible—in any venue—a community, a neighborhood, a campus, a classroom. They have a reputation for working for the greater good—not for themselves.

I have influence, built up over many years, based on long professional relationships, working hard, and holding many roles. And there's no doubt that, as one moves up in an organization, she or he gains power. But the reality is, you gain more authority by the use of less power. Persuading people to take action because it is in the collective best interest is a more powerful—and more reliable—way to lead. I think this approach has the greatest potential for making lasting change.

Leadership matters. In any organization, almost any leader can get by during good times, when things are going well. Even so, poor leadership in good times is not strategic enough to

capitalize on those good times. But the status quo will not last for long. Change is constant.

Leadership is tested—and matters—most in the face of challenging situations. Times of crisis usually require large-scale change, significant innovation, and problem solving. It's there that the hard work is done, and it may seem particularly difficult to do it right. But the alternative—poor leadership—is not an acceptable option.

Studying and thinking about leadership is important. A couple of years ago, a small group within my cabinet suggested we actively study and discuss leadership in a more organized, disciplined fashion. It was an opportunity to challenge ourselves, to reflect, share, and learn from each other—to flex our “leadership muscles.” We started incorporating a short leadership segment at the start of our weekly meetings. We took turns sharing perspectives or examples of leadership, either leadership theory or leadership in action. We discussed what we read in light of current situations we were dealing with. One take-home message that stuck with all of us is the need for a leader to remain curious and grateful, and convey both in how she or he operates. And know that patience is a virtue when trying to drive larger change.

Bringing about institutional change often requires a culture shift. And that

translates to thinking, operating, and behaving differently. It often requires a shift in people's comfort zones, and that's not easy for most of us—including me. Knowing not only your institution, but also the culture in which it operates are important. A leader is a catalyst for change and has to recognize the nuances of the existing culture and the current institutional environment to better understand the work ahead to bring about change.

Because the path forward is rarely clear, I have come to recognize that a successful leader has to be comfortable with a high degree of ambiguity and be able to make meaningful connections in seemingly dissimilar and disparate places. It's important to remain attuned to a background hum of impending change and appreciate the degree of anxiety that causes in everyone, including me. But that's okay because that bit of angst has always kept me on my toes.

It's important to take on challenges outside your comfort zone. Leadership is informed by what you learn from seeking out opportunities for greater engagement, doing more than you need to do. It's how you grow in your sense of self, as an engaged citizen and as a leader.

For example, the development of the Primary Partnership with the University of Maine at Machias and the assumption of the presidency of that campus were growth experiences for me. I thought hard about the importance of that institution to Downeast Maine and saw the partnership as a natural extension of UMaine's land grant mission, allowing us to serve the state in a new way. I'm proud of the work we've done, and the close relationship that has grown—and will expand—between our campuses. The success of the Primary Partnership did—and continues to—involve the work of many people, on both campuses. Institutional change

takes a village. And people need to be seen—and see themselves—as leaders with the potential to bring about change, to make a difference. Empowering others to be leaders is critical for successful change initiatives.

Also critical to growth and success in leadership and in life are mentors. I was lucky in having role models and mentors who were themselves leaders. They were smart, analytical, creative, and people oriented. My role models also emphasized the importance of mentoring others. I tell students that it is important to observe successful, competent leaders, and understand why they are so respected and successful. How do they act and communicate? What do you see when you watch them in action?

At UMaine, I have the good fortune to have been a longtime member of the community. I am engaged in the community and have a depth and breadth of experience that has permitted me to know first-hand the pleasure and importance of teaching and mentoring students, of being a scientist at the state's land grant university and a high-level administrator. My career pathway was unusual. It is not common for leaders to stay in a community for multiple decades as I have. Nonetheless, leaders at all levels need to connect to community organizations, institutions, and various constituencies to tune in. The appreciation for what exists and why folks will be loath to change can come from listening intently to constituents, being empathetic.

Leadership that brings about institutional change cannot be done in a vacuum. It is not a solitary undertaking. It occurs in a context, and to be done right, it must be done with transparency and with as much input as possible. Because leaders accomplish very little single-handedly. A leader is part of a team, and successful change occurs because of the work of multiple leaders.

Accomplishments ascribed to the best leaders need to be seen in context, as achieved by the collective we. I really tried to emphasize this point—on campus and off—often referring to the impact of the collective.

A good leader brings people together, not only to get their input, but also to be clear on the collective goals and the steps to getting there. It puts your challenges, timelines, factors, goals out there—accessible to others. Some would say it increases vulnerability. I say it advances meaningful change by removing the mystery and reducing suspicion.

As historian Doris Kearns Goodwin described in her biography of Abraham Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*, the best leaders resist the temptation to populate their cabinets or counsel only with people who agree with them. People who disagree are essential for broad community representation and informed leadership.

On the back end, the leadership team needs to develop a level of comfort and trust necessary to push against one another, ensuring that what needs to be said is said—and heard—at the beginning rather than at the end of the process. I want people to push against me—even if I don't seem overjoyed at the moment. It forces the consideration of widely divergent viewpoints, and that is a good thing. Does this ensure perfection? Nothing does. It's important to admit when you've made a mistake, that a point should have been a little clearer or explained a little better.

When peers, constituents, and community members see you as credible and operating in a straightforward way, they will know with confidence that you're doing what you think is best for the enterprise, even if it may not be exactly what they would prefer or always in their individual best interest.

In leadership, as in life, there are challenges, but also opportunities for

significant progress. A good leader, at any level, recognizes those moments and takes advantage of them. 🐟



Susan Hunter

became the twentieth president of the University of Maine on July 7, 2014. In 2017, she also became president of the University

of Maine at Machias. Hunter began her full-time career at the University of Maine in 1991 as a faculty member in the Department of Biological Sciences. Her administrative positions included chair of the Department of Biological Sciences, associate provost and dean for undergraduate education, and five years as the executive vice president for academic affairs and provost. Immediately prior to her appointment as UMaine's first woman president, Hunter served as vice chancellor for academic affairs for the University of Maine System.