



“Our Finest Hour” September 25th, 2020

“Doing the ‘Right’ Thing en Route to Riding or Sailing into the Sunset”

Leadership is an interesting commodity, even during a pandemic. Countless scholars have dug deep into its multi-layered strata, only to climb out of their cavernous work site to be greeted by the bright light of epiphany. Their sudden sense of discovery often leads to an outpouring of categorized traits, clever labels, and strained examples of those whom they believe fit their supposedly-never-before-quite-captured-this-way model. I joined their club about five decades ago and initiated my own leadership study. It was (and remains) a small scale, non-randomized, design incorporating no controls while addressing a simple, unsophisticated theory based on sleep and sunset modalities.

Grandad helped me develop the theory when as he was retiring from the Frisco Railroad, and I beginning my first job as an afterhours route man for Colonial Bakery. Being raised by Grandad was not unlike having Merlin at my side, encouraging me to experiment by putting me “in the other fella’s “shoes” as it were. This was designed to teach empathy and understandings. He didn’t turn me into a fish, but he taught me how to catch them. And he didn’t cast magical spells, but he gave me endless advice. On leadership, albeit loosely defined, he posed the theory: “If you do the right thing, you will sleep well.” He was right. I have, and I do. The end.

[Editor’s note: It goes without saying that the word “right” is the rub, here. Will save that discussion for another time, because Grandad also told me to “do the right thing, and then suffer the consequences.”]

I have held a number of different leadership positions over the past half century. [Another editor’s note: One decade was outside the field of education.] And I have always slept well after doing the right thing. When I don’t sleep well it is because I leap out of my mind in the middle of the night wondering if I turned off the water at the stock tank. Occasionally, a full moon or meteor shower will keep me up, too, but that is by choice.

In terms of the dean gig, I was first asked to do that job by the vice president of academic affairs and president at the turn of the millennium but stepped aside eight years later when a new cast of characters granted me a sabbatical that turned into a very successful four-year gold mining expedition. Was again asked to do the job in 2012 by the provost and president. From 2000 to 2008 and again from 2012 to today, I have hired scores of new faculty (including administrators with faculty rank) and a good number of staff, as well. During the search processes for faculty, I have interviewed approximately 179.3 people. The last question I always ask during these interviews is, “When your career is over and you are riding or sailing (you choose) off into the sunset, imagine yourself taking one last look back over your shoulder. What do you want to see?”

The overwhelming response is simply, “That I made a difference.” BTW, those of you who might be squirming as you read this, because you gave a different answer, don’t. I hired you anyhow. Because, like leadership, there is obviously no “right” answer to such a question.

About a year ago this fall, Provost Einhellig and I began having detailed conversations focused on a retirement plan for yours truly. These became more serious last April. I had given my word that I would see our CAEP accreditation process through to a complete and successful conclusion before I retired. As you will recall, the CAEP site team visited our campus in November 2019 but it took their Accreditation Council until April 2020 to issue their official, written report stating the MSU EPP was fully accredited. By that time, the darn pandemic was going full bore, and we were sheltered in place, so leaving in the middle of our unsettled spring semester didn’t seem like the right thing to do. (If I had, I would not

have slept very well.) So, we managed our way through the spring, we provided a very successful summer program, and we continue to make the fall semester work as we simultaneously plan for spring 2021. In fact, our recruitment efforts and new certificate programs have resulted in increased College enrollments over fall 2019. Amazing! I even watched a couple of college football games recently, including MSU – OU, and I'm going to watch a few more tomorrow.

On August 3, 2020, after almost three years' worth of publicly sharing my intent to ride or sail off into the sunset, and after at least three different delayed retirement dates, I sent Provost Einhellig a memo asking him and President Smart to begin more specific conversations, so I could choose a retirement date that would be in the best interest of the University and College. Prudent planning takes time, but I have at last settled on a date: February 1, 2021.

There is most certainly cause for some excitement. Soon after you read this, Provost Einhellig will announce how the University plans to move forward with the search for a new dean, first with an interim for a year and a half who will be appointed sooner, rather than later. The goal is to provide a very smooth transition that ensures our many successful initiatives continue without missing a lick while maintaining stability for our College.

Whenever I mount my trusty steed Hannibal or glide across Fellows Lake in my '59 Crosby next spring, I will look back over my shoulder, and I will smile the smile of gratitude. Because it has been "a privilege to be a Bear."

David