

Leadership, Stewardship, and Excellence – Reaching Together for the Stars Or, “It Ain’t Easy **Being Green**”

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A very famous character said that a long time ago, so I do not feel the least bit uncomfortable using it as the title of this article. You, no doubt, have now recalled who that character was, haven't you? It was Kermit the Frog, the Muppet character dearly beloved by millions and yet reviled for his oftentimes brusque delivery manner!

Kermit and I share a lot in common, I am told.

It should come as little surprise that this year's motto and theme should conjure up the green notion for this author. You see, after nearly 30 years in the higher education community and after years of advocating for

change, change showed up on my front door! And it wasn't accompanied by a welcome wagon! But life goes on, and I was presented with the opportunity to reflect on many of the things I had written and talked about. One thing stood out very clearly: “It is not important what happens to you, but what you do about it when it does.” Thus, undeterred by the event, my focus turned to NAEB and my first love – sharing information. The hustle and bustle that frequently crowded the many deadlines and deliverables was now removed from the landscape. No excuse exists to limit my contribution other than my many self-imposed limitations – so beware.

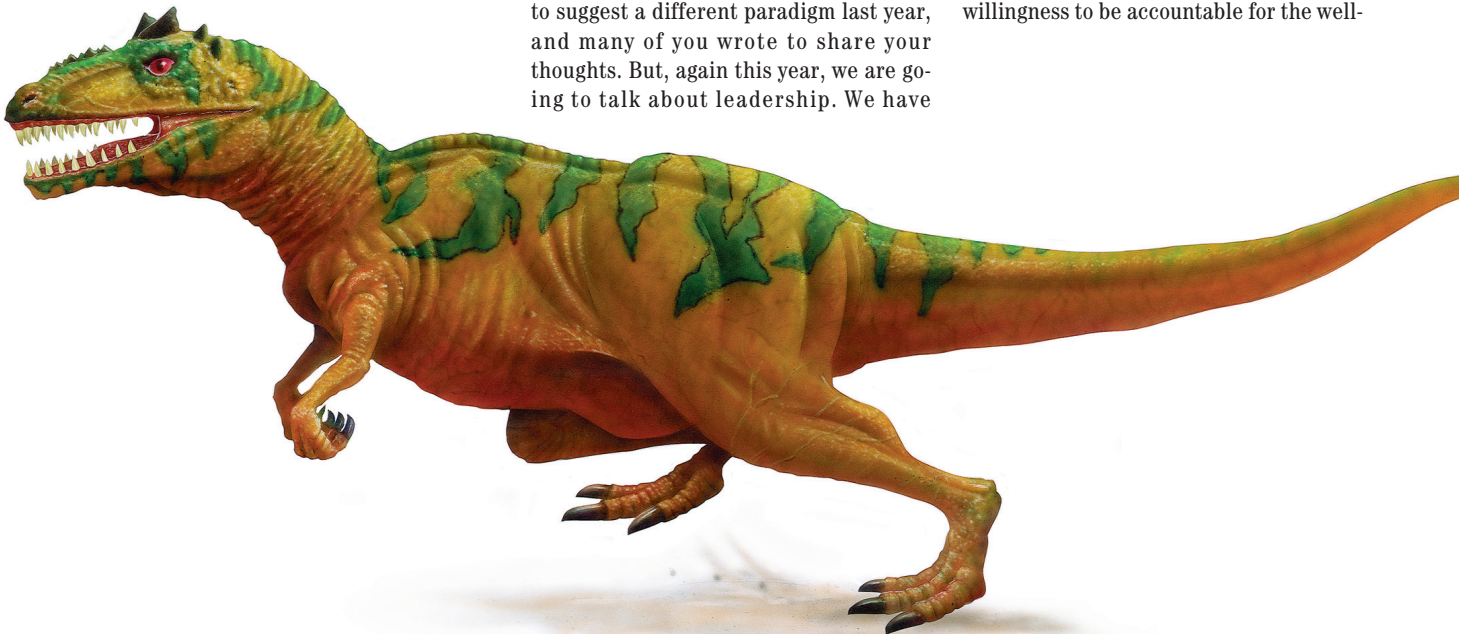
You know, this leadership thing just gets me going! You will recall that I tried to suggest a different paradigm last year, and many of you wrote to share your thoughts. But, again this year, we are going to talk about leadership. We have

broadened the topic by adding the notion of stewardship to the mix, but then complicated it by inserting excellence into this discussion.

Leadership

It remains as true today as it was a year ago. There is a dearth of information on leadership. What we do not know how to do well is follow, or team! Think of George Bush and the problems he is having leading us to buy into the Iraq recovery plan, contrasted to the absence of problems he had leading us into war? Now is the issue leadership or is it followership?

In the context of the subject matter of this article, what is stewardship? Stewardship is, according to Peter Block, “...the willingness to be accountable for the well-



being of the larger organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us.” Of course, I have chosen to define the organization as this space-ship we call Earth and to more closely follow the traditional definition of stewardship, which is to hold something in trust for another – specifically, in this case, all other living things, both now and in the future. I do not think Mr. Block would object.

The fundamental problem with leadership, in the classic sense, is that we continue to be confused by the failed paradigms of the past – one of those being that the real leaders are hard, command-and-control-driven, near-perfect, above reproach, charismatic, and results-oriented, focusing on the bottom line. Thus, the modern M.B.A.-CEO leadership model we have come to embrace. The problem here is that none of this is true. It begins with the failure of the economic model that is looking only at the next fiscal quarter or, at best, the year. Living systems (and yes, we humans are but one of those systems) don’t behave that way. Our spaceship can’t even begin to understand something as insignificant as a quarter (90 days) when, in geologic terms, humankind is but a very tiny blip on the graph of the timeline. More important is the notion that soft skills are what real leaders have and cherish – and accepting the fact that the last bottle of “Old Command and Control” has been consumed is critical to success. There is also the role that intuition plays in leadership. Having studied intuition in depth, I find the topic remains germane today. We use it routinely. Yet, we males, in particular, continue to deny its existence.

Transitioning into the 21st century is, at this time, highly evolutionary and the bursting of the dot.com era has led some to believe that we are going to regress to a time when authority and accountability were a single point in an organization. I do not believe that the backslide will survive, even if you believe it is happening. Too much is riding on a future where “collaboration and teamwork” is a necessity, not a fad!

The esteemed *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) recently focused its attention on leadership in an issue titled “Best of HBR on Leadership: It’s Hard Being Soft.” When the HBR concludes that a “best of”

series should address this issue, we have moved beyond fad and we are becoming mainstream. The business publication *Fortune* (July 21, 2003) published an article by the distinguished Jim Collins titled “The 10 Greatest CEOs of All Time,” which evidences this point even more strongly. Not a single command-and-control CEO shows up in the rankings. You are encouraged to read it and draw your own conclusions. One conclusion that might be drawn is that, within these ten leaders, there exists a clear vision of the role of the CEO extending considerably outside the boardroom, with a focus well beyond their investors. There is a thread of social justice in each of these profiles that cannot be overlooked, and that thread is so rarely explored in conversations centered solely upon leadership.

Stewardship

The inclusion of the stewardship dimension to this theme interested me greatly because our profession is uniquely

situated to address both social justice issues as well as environmental issues. The problem is we haven’t figured out that it is time for us to grab this issue (*carpe diem*) and to accept our responsibility as stewards. Why? Is it because no one has told us to do it yet? What does this say about leadership? And what does this say about followership?

We are challenged at our core, and we are floundering. We are floundering because we lack a compass. That compass is available in the form of *principles* – an old-fashioned word with old-fashioned connotations – but it is the piece that is lacking. Just what are our principles? What are the principles of our leaders? What are the principles of those we serve?

The beauty of the American system is that the leaders are constantly changing – passionate citizens become leaders to champion their cause, and then become followers again. All interested parties have an opportunity to help shape and direct efforts, including the discussion of

the operative timeline – now vs. later. Interestingly, the youth have the longest timeline! And encouraging you to consider acting proactively may not be enough. The signposts just do not stop coming. We now have the University of California System “getting it” after students sent 10,000 post cards trying to convince the Regents that green power was what they wanted for themselves. A similar event, also led by students, occurred at the University of Colorado. So, we see stewardship showing up on the doorsteps of academia. It may not be on the purchasing agent’s desk yet, but it is knocking on the Regents’ doors. We, as a profession, must decide whether we want to be led into this by the businesspeople, dictated to do it by board policy, or regulated to do it by state and federal legislative action. But the train has left the station, and it is heading north!

We should not be surprised that this is asked of us. Every day, we manage capital. And we are comfortable doing just that. Our problem may lie in the fact that we do not really understand how many forms of capital there are. We may also be confused in assessing the value of these various forms of capital.

There are five forms of capital. Those with which we are most familiar are manufactured capital, basically stuff we buy, and financial capital, the end-product of the value the other forms of capital provide. If the other forms did not exist, financial capital would be absolutely worthless. But in the current economic paradigm, it is valued most highly. The remaining three forms of capital are less obvious. Social capital is the organizational and co-operational services used by people to live and work. Only relatively recently have the economists begun to figure out that this is valuable. Human capital is the value of health, knowledge, skills, and spirituality aggregated. And lastly, natural capital is the value of ecological services, clean air, water, arable soil, fisheries, and forests. It is estimated that the annualized value of this capital is \$33 trillion. Basically, the challenge we must accept is to learn how to manage all five forms of capital – not just two.

This phenomenon is not just happening here, it is happening across the world. Our friends in the United Kingdom have tackled this issue straightaway and have made

tremendous progress. They have created a national commission and have written their case statement. They have provided a precise, detailed manuscript to every higher education institution, invited comments, collaborated, engaged in dialog, and put forth their model. They used their Forum for the Future organization to produce the work with the Higher Education Partnership for Sustainability. The document is entitled *Purchasing for Sustainability*. It serves as a guide for higher education institutions. It may be found on the Web at www.heps.org.uk. This is an outstanding contribution to the argument for Purchasing to take the lead and define the first steps toward a restorative economy in which all five forms of capital are valued and managed.

Thus, if we can come to accept this new opportunity, then the dream of marrying leadership to stewardship can take on a much broader and more meaningful definition, and future generations may have a quality life that approaches ours. This will be a most challenging target but also a most rewarding phase for our profession. I believe we are up to the task. I know we are talented enough to begin the process. The question is always the same for me. Are we ready to change our minds? If we are, then changed behavior has an opportunity to occur, and only through changed behavior can we step up to become true stewards and do great things! Because if you never are asked to do great things, you never will!

Excellence

And that brings us to the *excellence* component. Tom Peters started searching for it in 1985. He had a hard time defining excellence and a harder time finding it. Lots of people claim to have it and every institution is fast developing numerous “centers of excellence.” The truth is that very few examples are going to emerge. Those that do will probably not take place as a result of the current recipe of throwing lots of resources at the problem and trying to recruit big names. Read that *Fortune* article again. The really effective and influential leaders are not the names we know in the common lexicon. The reasons many of the ten greatest CEOs got identified as such had to do with humility and a search for equity, not excellence. You see again and again the reasons for endorsing the new economic concept of the triple bottom-line, which acknowledges and values all five types of capital. The elements are economy, equity, and ecology. So do something great. But do it because you love all living systems. For a really interesting read on leadership from the perspective of influence, see Michael H. Hart’s book, *The 100*. I am sure you will find the top ten to be most interesting. Remember you do can do great things.



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