

# What Makes a Good Leader?

By Rob Jenkins

My experience with college faculty members is that, while they don't particularly like being told what to do, they abhor a leadership vacuum.

Years ago, the college where I teach employed deans over each major discipline: humanities, social science, science, etc. Faculty members used to grouse about their deans' decisions and complain that they didn't have enough input. Then the administration changed the structure, replacing deans with committees made up mostly of faculty members—and people complained that there was no one to go to with problems, no one to make a final decision. Now we're back to discipline deans.

So the problem is not that, as faculty members, we mind being led. Indeed, on some level, we want to be led. It's just a question of what kind of leaders we'll have, and what kind of leaders we'll tolerate. Being led is one thing, but we don't want to be dictated to, we don't want to be treated like wayward children, and we don't want to be sold a used car.

Speaking personally, I associate these qualities with good leadership in an academic setting:

- **Listening.** A good leader doesn't think he or she knows everything, or always knows better than other people.
- **Inclusiveness.** A good leader not only listens, but listens to lots of different people—and takes their advice and their views into account when making decisions.
- **Delegation.** A good leader recognizes the importance of giving up control in certain areas because other people know more about that area and/or bear primary responsibility for it. Inclusiveness and delegation, together, are the essence of shared governance.
- **Sincerity.** A good leader doesn't just pretend to listen or pretend to delegate. He or she doesn't merely pay lip service to the concept of shared governance or attempt to manipulate the process for personal gain.
- **Decisiveness.** Once all sides have had their say, and the decision-making ball is in the leader's court, he or she will make that decision and accept responsibility for it.
- **Accountability.** A good leader is not constantly pointing fingers or blaming others for problems—even if they actually did create them.
- **Optimism.** Whatever challenges a unit or institution might face, a good leader is always positive (at least publicly), consistently projecting an attitude of realistic optimism about the

future. A good leader can address issues openly and frankly without spreading doom and gloom.

- Realism. At the same time, a good leader is objective about challenges.
- Frankness. A good leader tells it like it is. He or she does not pat faculty and staff members on the head and assure them that everything's going to be OK when it might not be. (Note: Most leaders I've known who liked to think of themselves as "straight shooters" earned that reputation by saying unkind things to people, often unnecessarily. To me, that's not what being a "straight shooter" means.)
- Self-Effacement. A good leader not only accepts blame; he or she also deflects praise and credit to others. A good leader understands that, when others in the unit earn recognition, that reflects positively on him or her. A good leader does not always have to be the one in the spotlight—and, indeed, may actually shun the spotlight. A good leader is also not primarily concerned with moving up the ladder or making himself or herself look good. The best leaders want others, and the institution, to look good.
- Collegiality. A good leader does not place himself or herself above rank-and-file faculty and staff members but rather considers them colleagues in the truest sense of that term.
- Honesty. A good leader is scrupulously honest in all of his or her dealings. No lies, no dissembling, no double-talk or administrative-speak. If the situation warrants, a good leader simply says, "I can't comment on that right now."
- Trustworthiness. If a good leader commits to do something, then he or she does it, if humanly possible—and if not, explains why and accepts responsibility for failure. If one tells a good leader something in confidence, that information remains confidential.
- Morality. When all is said and done, a good leader can be counted on to do what he or she believes is right and best for all concerned, even if it is unpopular in some quarters.

I could go on, but I'm more interested in hearing what you have to say. What, to you, are some of the qualities of an ideal academic leader?

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