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Hackett High School

John M. Dunn
Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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• Thank you for inviting me here today with you, and let me be among the first to congratulate those of you who are being inducted into the Hackett High School chapter of the National Honor Society. You've worked very hard to earn this important distinction. You and your families and your teachers deserve recognition for keeping your focus on the important goal--education.

• We know you have great futures ahead of you. We know also that you already play leadership roles here in your high school and will certainly do the same when you are in college. I know I speak for my colleagues around the state when I say we're ready and eager to have you on our campuses and preparing for your careers.

• I've been asked to talk a bit about leadership, which I'm happy to do. I've spent some years developing my own style of leadership, so I have a few things to share. But each leader has to develop a style that works for him or her--one that fits both their personality and situation. You'll do that over many years, but let me give you a few broad observations that work well for me.

• First of all, listen
We tend to get elected or selected for leadership roles because we are talkers--we communicate well and express opinions or ideas that resonate with others. That may be how we secure "leadership" positions. Being a leader, however, frequently means we have to stop talking and spend some time--a lot of time--listening.

I came to Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo almost two years ago. Even before I arrived, people were asking me about my vision for the university. That's what you ask new leaders, I guess. What I told them then and what told them for
many months afterward, is that it would be inappropriate for me to lay out a vision and direction without really knowing the culture, the history, the resources and most of all, the people involved with every level of the University. It takes time to learn those qualities.

I have the privilege of leading one of our state and nation's great universities. When I was selected to lead WMU, it was already one of fewer than 200 research universities in the country and just five in Michigan. A lot of wonderful things were already in place, and I needed to learn about them all.

Instead of coming here with big ideas, I needed to come here with big ears--to spend some time really listening to people at every level of the organization. I'm still doing that, and I expect to do that throughout my presidency. I've found incredibly talented people with good ideas about how to improve and enhance our core mission--making our students successful. Their ideas are good and they're rooted in their experience with WMU. It makes my job as a leader easier when I find good people with good ideas to move us forward.

So, I recommend that your first order of business as the student leaders I know you are and will be is to stop talking and spend some time really listening to your constituents. Find out what they need and want from you, and find out what their good ideas are. I guarantee you won't regret the time spent.

And when it comes to one of the tougher parts of being a leader--resolving disputes--listening skills will pay enormous dividends. You simply can't solve problems without really listening to the issues from all sides.

• Second--Choose your words carefully
If you are going to be a successful leader, you need to know that words have great power. Words carelessly chosen or thrown out in an offhanded manner have the
power to wound people in a lasting way. The right words have the power to make those you lead decided to embrace the goals you wish to accomplish.

Mark Twain put it perfectly when he said, "The difference between the right word, and the almost-right word, is the difference between lightning, and lightning-bug."

**Third--Take things in stride**
You are part of an organization. You can and will invest all of your energy, hopes and ambitions in some initiative that requires the work of others. Things won't always work out well. When they don't, you'll be faced with the choice of railing against the fates and placing blame--or being a real leader and forgiving and moving forward.

(This would be a great place for the Service Station/"That'll happen" story)

You know, I've never forgotten that moment or forgotten how I felt when, even though I had screwed up, that man acknowledged that things happen, that things go wrong and that it's not the end of the world when they do.

As I got older and moved into leadership positions, I made that moment part of who I am and how I deal with problems. He was right. "That'll happen" has become something to remember when I make a mistake or when someone in my organization makes a mistake. We get past it and we keep moving forward.

**Fourth--Help develop new leaders**
Build a team. Nothing makes being a leader easier than finding and recognizing potential in others and giving them some space to do great things. If they're part of your organization, you get to bask in the glow of the success your team members generate.
Your organization runs more smoothly, the people within your organization feel empowered because they see good things happen and they know their work is valued and appreciated. Best of all, when you need to step away from your leadership role temporarily or permanently, you can do so knowing that your organization will run smoothly and people will admire the strength of the team you've built.

We have a wonderful communication professor on our campus named Peter Northouse. He is known internationally for his work on the topic of leadership and how leaders are made.

He's kind of a quiet type himself and likes to keep a low profile, but organizations like Disney and some of the top MBA programs and corporate leadership institutes in the nations use his books to teach leadership theory.

He's convinced that people aren't born leaders. They learn to become leaders. Some people are more charismatic than others, but you don't have to be charismatic to be a leader. Leadership has to do with creating a vision, being a role model and empowering others. He believes everyone can learn how to be a leader, because leadership is about how the leader behaves and responds to his or her followers.

I agree. When I was in college, I could not have predicted that I'd be in the position I'm in today. I've learned a lot over the years. I'm still learning. That's my final advice to you. **Keep learning.** Keep watching people whose leadership style you admire.

Take from those observations the things that work well for you and can be authentic parts of who and what you are. If you do that, I have no doubt you'll continue to grow as a leader and make your mark here and in the larger world that is your future. Those of us who are part of your home community will be watching you. Make us proud.
Thank you.