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Frankenmuth National Honor Society Meeting

John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

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Frankenmuth National Honor Society Meeting
Dr. John M. Dunn
Nov. 9, 2009

Good evening and thank you so much for the opportunity to be part of your event. I'm happy to be speaking to an audience of National Honor Society members. You and your families and your teachers should be congratulated for keeping your focus on the important goal--education. I know I speak for my colleagues around the state when I say we're ready and eager to have you on our campuses when it's time for you to take the next step in preparing for your future.

- When I was invited to speak this evening, someone suggested that I focus on one of the four tenets of the National Honor Society--Scholarship, Service, Character and Leadership. As a longtime admirer of the NHS and its tenets, that presents something of a problem. I see those four tenets as inextricably linked.

Is there, for instance, any true leaderships without character or devotion to service? Or is there real scholarship that is not intended to serve or to inform leadership?

But in deference to the time allotted, and since I am certain I see a few looks of panic setting in, let me assure you I will not speak about all four important areas. I will instead focus on leadership.

Many of you already play leadership roles here in your high school and will certainly do the same when you are in college. You know already that leadership has to reflect your personal style. 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.

There are five things I've found important in being a leader:

- The ability to listen
- The ability to choose your words carefully
- An ability to take things in stride
- A commitment to building new leaders.
- The desire to keep learning

• **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. 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 two and a half years ago. Even before I arrived, people were asking me about my vision for Western Michigan 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 to Kalamazoo with big ideas, I needed to come 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.

What I learned--by listening--about the talents and resources on our campus and in our community have led us to some visionary new goals. We're now seriously looking at beginning a medical school, for instance, and we have other new initiatives on the way.

So, I recommend that your first order of business even as the student leaders 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 decide 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. When you build your team, don't necessarily look for teammates who think and solve problems just like you do. A truly dynamic, productive and flexible team is diverse in terms of its makeup. Build a team with diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, and even work experience level.

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.

- **Fifth--Keep learning**

My final leadership tip for you is to **keep learning**. Remember the favorite phrase of Michelangelo--the original Renaissance man whose leadership is revered in fields as varied as art, poetry, engineering and science. He was often quoted even into his late 80s as saying, "Ancora Imparo"-- "I am still learning."

So there you have it, the John M. Dunn Top Five Tips on Leadership

- The ability to listen
- The ability to choose your words carefully
- An ability to take things in stride
- A commitment to building new leaders.
- The desire to keep learning

Closing

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.

Keep watching people whose leadership style you admire. Take from those observations the things that can work well for you and can be authentic parts of who and what you are. 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. Your home community and those of us on the campuses you choose will be watching you. Make us proud.

Thank you.