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Leadership Simulcast

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• Good afternoon. It's my pleasure to be part of today's roster of speakers. Leadership development is an important topic--perhaps more today than at any time in my memory. I bring to the table a two-fold focus.
  
  -First, I lead a great public research university--Western Michigan University--and it is my mission 24/7 to support, protect, challenge and encourage the 30,000 students, faculty and staff to continually build our university so that it is always on the leading edge of the multiple disciplines and initiatives in which we work.
  
  -Second. It is the mission of the University I lead to support, challenge, nurture and encourage leadership in a new generation of leaders who are studying at Western Michigan University. We are deeply aware that how we lead and how we inculcate leadership qualities in our students will have an enormous impact on the communities we serve in our state, nation and world.
  
• I've been specifically asked to share my own philosophy of leadership and speak to the idea of creating a vision that can continue in the future under the leadership of those who follow me. In higher education--vision "the 'V' word--is the challenge laid at the door of every president. New presidents, in particular are greeted with the question, "What is your vision for the institution?"
  
• My own answer to that question nearly three years ago--and the one I recommend to any new leader--was an honest one. "I don't know yet."
It takes time, patience and the input of the entire organization to set a course and determine goals that are appropriate, challenging and doable. It means finding the organization's strengths and potential and identifying unmet needs that can be addressed.

• How do you develop a vision so that the goals become part of the organization and remain so? How do you lead an organization toward achieving those goals. I think there are four critical components to the process. They are the critical components of what I view as leadership.
  1) The ability to listen
  2) A respect for the value of words carefully chosen
  3) The ability to adjust and take things in stride
  4) A commitment to developing new leaders

First of all, listen to find a vision worth holding on to.
• 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.

• Let me give you an example. 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. To propose a new direction without doing that would have demonstrated a lack of respect for what was already in place and the work of the leaders who preceded me.
• What I heard when I listened, was the story of an institution with great strengths--in research, in commitment to the environment and in innovation. That university was located in a community known for its century-long heritage in the life sciences. What I learned from listening, what I knew from my career in higher education and what I uncovered in looking at our nation's needs, led me to pose a simple question that has taken hold on my campus and in our community. "Have you ever thought about starting a medical school?"

• That question--triggered by lots of listening--today is a critical part of the vision and direction for Western Michigan University. That question--and the answer--were generated by careful listening and communication. Today, as a community, we are working hard to build a medical school that will pay enormous dividends to our university, our community and our state. The medical school initiative is also one major element in efforts focused on building a healthy university--developing a shared vision that I hope will last long after I have retired.

• The original thought about a medical school might have been an observation from someone who brought a fresh perspective in viewing the school and community's existing strengths. What grew from that is part of a shared vision that continues to grow and be refined by a community.

• **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 or to turn away from your ideas. The right words have the power to make those you lead decide to embrace the goals you wish to accomplish. The right words can make those opposed to your ideas and goals at least stop to consider the possibilities.
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."

Words carefully and respectfully chosen are the basic components of civility. How often of late have we seen contentious issues grow more contentious by a carelessly tossed word or phrase. If there is a single great failing I see among our nation's leaders today, it is the example--the bad example--being shown to our next generation of leaders--today's young people.

Civility is the lifeblood of healthy working relationships. That is a core message on our campus and one that we build into every interaction with our students.

Third--Take things in stride
As a leader, 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. Whenever I'm faced with such a situation, I'm reminded of a time early in my working life.

**(Great spot 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.

**Finally, help develop new leaders**

Recognize that your leadership will not last forever. Keep your stamp on your organization by helping develop the generation of leaders who will move your vision forward. 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.

**In closing…**

• I've been in my role at Western Michigan University for nearly three years now. I believe now a shared vision for our University is emerging, building strength, garnering support and becoming part of who we are as an institution. The institution is embracing a role as a healthy university, with health seen in its very broadest sense of the term.
  - Intellectual vigor
  - Physical health
  - Emotional and spiritual awareness
  - Financial health and stability
  - A healthy dose of self-esteem and confidence, and

The ability to think beyond our individual and limited view to a larger perspective of the needs of our greater society--a world view.
We're working to preserve our individual, institutional and natural resources and preserve and enhance our commitment to human capital--the potential of every member of our community. I recommend those goals as broad leadership goals that can be incorporated into any sector.

As a leader, I'm proud of the vision we are developing together. Because it has taken time to grow and become ingrained in our planning and dreaming, I suspect it will survive well into the tenure of the University's next leader. It is not my vision. It is our vision. I hope that leader arrives on campus with the intention to:

- Listen
- Choose their words carefully
- Take things in stride
- Help develop new leaders.

Thank you for considering my philosophy. Enjoy the rest of the presentations today.