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Bronson Leadership Retreat

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Good morning. And thank you, Frank, for that very kind--very positive--introduction. As you mentioned, I've been asked to speak about the idea of leadership and vision specifically in connection with our new School of Medicine.

Right up front, I need to say that vision and leadership are shared qualities. In this community, and specifically with the medical school initiative, vision and leadership have been found across our leadership spectrum. Frank Sardone and our colleague Paul Spaude at Borgess shared a vision and a commitment that is making a new medical school in Kalamazoo a reality. Together, the three of us have been privileged to encounter community leaders who were able to share and promote that vision with us.

I'm going to focus on three qualities that must be part of the mix for visionary leadership to exist and succeed.

- An idea that resonates
- Timing
- Commitment/Passion

**An Idea that Resonates**

People often think that coming up with the idea itself is the toughest part of developing a bold vision. I disagree. Often, the idea is there waiting for the right
combination of circumstances. Sometime it is there literally begging to be given voice. What is keeping it under the radar can sometimes be a matter of perspective.

Jonathan Swift once said: "Vision is the art of seeing the invisible."

The idea of having a Kalamazoo-based medical school WAS such a vision.

When I came to Kalamazoo in 2007 as the new president of Western Michigan University, I already knew a great deal about the University.

I knew of the international reputation of many of its programs and its status as a Carnegie-designated research university—one of fewer than 200 in the nation. I knew it was a University I would be proud to lead. I also knew it was located in a comfortable community that seemed more vibrant than many of its size and tradition in the Midwest.

As I prepared to take the helm of WMU, I made a series of discoveries that were somewhat unexpected. I discovered that the University I would lead is a social, academic and economic lynchpin for a community of incredible depth, great success and the potential for even more.

• It's a community that boasts two world-class teaching hospitals—Bronson Healthcare and Borgess Health—which already provided the resources necessary to offer years three and four of a classic medical school education.

• It boasts a heritage built around the discovery of pharmaceuticals and medical devices.
• And it has a great breadth and depth of intellectual capital that is focused on life sciences, to an extent rarely found in a community this size.

Kalamazoo offered, in short, a beautifully developed infrastructure that caused me to pose one simple question very early in my relationship with this community:

"Have you folks ever considered building a medical school?"

The frame for the vision was already in place. No one had ever thought to take that final step to combine the picture and the frame. For me, with the perspective of a newcomer looking for the first time at all this community offers, it was so obvious. It just took a bit of 20-20 vision.

It WAS an obvious next step for Kalamazoo. Simply posing the question and saying the words out loud, however, was not sufficient. You can never assume everyone sees the same things you do and inherently recognizes the possibilities.

A vision has to be stated, over and over, and its ingredients conveyed in multiple settings. What I thought was so obvious--a no-brainer--was not as obvious to everyone in this community who had lived and worked here for many years. People settle into routines and viewpoints often without taking a step back to reassess the resources at hand, or recognize how some of those resources have grown or changed since they first viewed them.

Early in the process of talking about the vision, I was invited to talk with members of the Kalamazoo Academy of Medicine about the idea of a medical school. I spent the first 10 minutes of my presentation simply talking about Western Michigan University. During that 10 minutes, I'm sure more than a few eyes rolled and there
was a sense of impatience. They knew about WMU. They'd lived and worked in the community for years.

But I needed to make sure medical professionals in the room—who knew well the quality of the Kalamazoo medical sector—also knew that the University had changed dramatically in the past 25 years—that what once was a teacher's college had emerged as a national research university with a caliber of faculty and resources they had not even imagined.

I had to convey a similar message about the medical community to those on my campus. Many only knew there were some good medical facilities in Kalamazoo as well as a building on the edge of our campus that had something to do with medical education. I bragged about Bronson and its recognition as a Baldridge-recipient magnet status.

As a community, we had the resources in place, but the key players were working with incomplete information.

**Timing**

There's a burning question people have been asking us for most of the past three years.

Why now? Why at this time of economic distress, should we expend community resources on an ambitious undertaking like building a medical school?

The answer is both simple and complex. For the simple answer, let me move outside the healthcare realm and borrow this great observation by Marion Blakey,
CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association and former chief of the FAA. She said:

"You can't leave a footprint that lasts if you're always walking on tiptoe."

There is a time to recognize opportunity and move boldly to take advantage of it—even in the face of challenges. We determined four years ago that the best time was now. We determined that doing this meant making this a private medical school at a public university, because our state was not in a position to financially support this idea and, perhaps, would not be for many years.

The reason we can and must do this now is easily summarized. We developed this idea at what is really the perfect time in history. Forces are aligned in a way that makes this the time for this community to establish a medical school. The opportunity is a time-limited one. The decision to wait until times are better is quite simply a decision to pass on an opportunity that is tailor-made to leverage this community's strengths in a way that can enhance patient care nationally and secure this community's future for generations to come. Right now, there is a convergence of events and trends that add up to what I would call a "perfect storm" of challenge and opportunity.

The elements of that perfect storm that makes this Kalamazoo's moment to seize can be organized into five areas:

• A looming shortage of physicians,

• Changes to health care policy that will bring millions more into the system and require innovations like the appropriate use of information technology,
• Science-based changes to medical knowledge that will allow us to personalize medical treatment, and

• The nationally recognized need for change in our 100-year-old medical education tradition. In 2010, literally as our school was being launched, the Carnegie Foundation called for the 1910 Flexnor Report to be set aside in favor of a new paradigm in medical education.

• A focus on teamwork

• Integration of clinical and science throughout medical education.

Commitment

We had a vision in focus. The timing was right. The final element for those in leadership positions who have adopted a vision is to make a commitment to do heavy lifting.

Vaclav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic, is a playwright who has taught in WMU's creative writing summer program and is the recipient of an honorary degree from the University. I think he summed up the next step--commitment--well.

“Vision is not enough,” he said. "It must be combined with venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps, we must step up the stairs.”
Those steps have to be taken, one at a time. At this point for the School of Medicine, those steps have been taken over a period of nearly five years. We are in the middle of the accreditation process. We will welcome our first class in fall 2014. We have attracted the support of generous donors and next week, we will begin the renovation of the building that will house the School of Medicine. There will be steps to continue and new ones to take:

- Building community buy-in
- Additional fundraising
- Enhancing our administrative staff and faculty
- Refining our curriculum
- Meeting accreditation requirements
- Repurposing an existing facility

And we will continue to share the vision and convey its potential in every venue possible.

More steps will present themselves and be added to the staircase in front of us—more faculty recruitment, setting a research agenda, student recruitment, continued fundraising. I'm not sure those of us who have helped launch this vision will ever reach the top of that staircase, but we will get very close.

**Closing**

We had a good idea. The timing was right. We and this community have the commitment to make this happen. We will get very close to achieving our vision,
but we have one final step to take and this is often the most difficult for those invested in making the vision a reality.

We have to let go. The closer we get to success, the more we will find that the vision must be turned over to new leaders who will take this forward into the future. Those leaders--who may be among us here today--will add to a good idea and shape and mold the vision--our vision--in a way that will inevitably make it better. It will be difficult to do that, but the risk is well worth the result.

But there is one element of the vision I hope remains at its core, and it is this. Kalamazoo is an incredibly special and unique place. This medical school will feed on those qualities and add to them. As it does, I hope more and more of our community members--all of you--internalize that message and make it part of every conversation you have about Kalamazoo--"One Kalamazoo." We live in a place that is truly in the middle of a transformation. We're going from very, very good to even better.

Thank you for your support of the vision that is lifting our community and setting the stage for so many good things to come.

(14-plus minutes)