|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Speaker 1: | Well, I'm Jim Wagner and in about two weeks I’ll be completing 13 years of service to Emory University in the role of the presidency there. It's been a wonderful 13 years and I will be retiring from that, so it's a culmination of a professional career. Flattered to be asked to have my story included in your archive on accountable leaders and get opportunity as you might imagine from time to time to speak about leadership. I think it's rare that I’ve been able to give the same talk twice because one keeps learning about leadership, and particularly since leadership is so far from really being a science. |
|  | I have this theory. It’s a pretty shaky theory, but it’s a theory that says that the more we understand about something, the fewer things we publish about it. You don’t need that many books on algebra. Algebra is pretty, it’s really not open to debate [duration 00:01:12]. When I've given leadership talks in the past, I’ve made a point to go on the Amazon website and look at the number of books published in various areas to see if this theory is supported that the less we know, the more we write. |
|  | In fact, I did that. The number of books that come up when you enter the keyword "Algebra" is only 41 books. If you enter the keyword "golf", which has a little more variability to it, there are 38,000 titles that come up. If you enter the keyword "diet", there are 182,000 that just came up and if you enter the keyword "leadership", there are over 190,000. If the theory were true and of course you can’t control for all the other variables, but if the theory were true, that would say that we agree less upon the fundamentals of leadership than we do on dieting. There’s something humbling, I think, in talking about leadership. |
|  | I do believe that leaders are looked to to answer some fundamental questions and I’ll bet most of those 192,000 titles would agree. Four fundamental questions come to mind for an organization. Where are we going? How are we going to get there? What’s the next step and how are we doing? We use buzzwords for all those. Where are we going? That's vision. How are we going to get there? That’s strategy. What's the next step? That's tactics. How are we doing? That’s assessment. |
|  | The leader is accountable to [inaudible 00:03:06] to the organization and to those who depend upon the organization to be able to answer those questions as best as possible. I have found that my educational process in my learning as I mentioned continues. In fact, I wonder at times if I haven’t been a better learner later in my career, and the rate at which I have learned has actually increased as time passes. I do find that what I have sought during that time is something about the fundamentals of leadership. |
|  | This is particularly, understand this is particularly leadership in the context, well very specifically of academic leadership. Not only is there variability in styles of leadership as reflected by the number of titles you can find at Amazon, there is a spectrum, they're just a spectrum of opportunities to lead that run from the very authoritarian sort of leadership that we absolutely require in military, certain kinds of business, sports. We really don’t expect questions from members of the organization. |
|  | We feel an obligation to lead in an authoritarian process in such a way that those who are led are proud and we'd like to think they agree with most decisions, but that’s one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum is leadership not so much by authority as it is by influence. I think the universities operate much further toward that end of the spectrum. After all, at the end of the day, tenured faculty are not just summarily fired and removed from their positions. Tenure protects that for very good reasons by the way, but the nature of that style of leadership is so much different from the other style. |
|  | I also fear that part of what I will share today may not be broadly applicable to folks whose circumstance calls from more authoritarian responsibility. When I took the job here at Emory University, one of my mentors, a guy named Frank Rhodes, he was for 18 years the president at Cornell. He said, "Jim, you know, you’ll go to your toolbox, a leadership toolbox some day and you’ll find when you open it, the only tool in there is inspiration," and he wasn’t talking about flashy, [even 00:05:34] inspiration. He was talking about aligning the spirit, aligning the will of the people within your organization in a common way to try to get things done and that we wouldn’t have the additional tools of authority. I wouldn’t find the additional tools of authority in that. |
|  | I give you all this background because it's with all those caveats of how useless what I may have to say is that I would proceed through my story and try to grab onto those instances where I was able to add something to this quest around leadership. The quest, by the way, I found has a great deal to do with being accountable for, through integrity as opposed to accountable through fear, fear of consequences. I can hold you accountable in a couple of ways and one is to say, "My gosh, if you don’t do what you’re told in the way that you’re told to do it in the time frame that you’re told to do, well maybe I've got the wrong person in that job. |
|  | I think a different sort of motivation can couple with that. I'm not saying that's a [wrong 00:07:03]. There are certain times, instances and certain circumstances, certain organizations where, by gosh, it better work that way, but being motivated out of trust or belief in a vision, pursuit of the same causes, sharing the same values requires a certain organizational and leadership integrity. Now most of the time when you say the word "integrity", people think about honesty and truthfulness. There’s another dimension of integrity that goes with that and that has to do with constancy, solidity. |
|  | We say after an earthquake, "We'd better check the integrity of foundation," and we're not checking to see whether the foundation is honest. We're checking to see whether or not that foundation remains as it was and is sturdy. The question is about finding ultimately those things that you can believe in, and understand to be constant. My own experience, and I’m not the first to observe this and I wish I could quote somebody for you, but it seems that the older I've gotten and the more experience I’ve gotten, they're actually fewer things that I believe to be absolutely true, but those things that I believe to be true, I really believe to be absolutely true. |
|  | By the way, this is not something esoteric. I'm going to talk about my science a little later but I may as well bring us up right now. Consistency, that consistency definition of integrity, is something I think many people search for. Many of us as soon as we find enough of it, we stop searching and we may fall short of truth, so integrity is not just consistency. It’s consistency that’s based on truth. Science deals with this very directly. |
|  | Scientific theory, scientific theory has only three requirements. Theory must be consistent with current observation, it must be predictive and the third word is a fuzzy word. It says it must be falsifiable, so the theory of Newtonian gravity, Newton's understanding of gravity, must be consistent with current observation. When the apple falls, when you let go of the apple, it falls. Must be predictable. You must be able to use it to predict for example, it’s involved in predicting where the planets move and must be falsifiable. You must be able to understand or to suggest tests that contest it. |
|  | This definition's a very valuable definition. It says if you satisfy those three things, you've got a good theory. By the way, it also says that are certain things that won’t lend themselves to scientific theory on matters of faith. For example, have the [usual 00:10:23] falsifiability. That’s where faith comes in. Thou shalt not test the Lord, thy God. The problem though is that if we satisfy these three criteria and we have a wonderfully working theory, it’s not necessary that the theory be based on truth. |
|  | Newton’s theory of gravity works really, really well, well enough that I doubt we needed anything more than that to put people on the moon and likely no more than that to send people out to the outer reaches of our solar system. Newton himself was a little upset that his, or Newton and his colleagues, were upset that his theory didn’t quite work with the orbit of Mercury around the sun. He wasn’t quite sure about that but at the end of the day, to make the story a little shorter, his theory is not based on truth. |
|  | More true, apparently, is Einstein’s understanding that it’s not a matter of force that holds the planet's sun, a force of gravity, but it's rather a distortion of space that the sun has and each planet has as well that draws them together. It’s a better truth. By the way, it handles Mercury's orbit. By the way, it also handles the other problem that Newton had, his particular formula for gravity would have gravity apply itself without reference to time. In other words, beyond the speed of light. If we could've figured out how to communicate by that method, we would break a whole bunch of rules. |
|  | Anyway, my point remains, and they're example after example, that one can satisfy something. It can become satisfied with consistency without having it based on truth and if integrity is what we're after and integrity goes beyond that, we have to camp every now and then on what we understand to be consistent, but we have to keep looking for what is absolutely foundational. |
|  | Maybe to the story, born and reared in Silver Spring, Maryland, the middle of three boys, a very typical suburban family. We were ... It was sort of school, neighborhood and church. Mom and dad were both engaged in church. That’s been an important and again, growing dimension for me personally, those matters of faith. Dad was an agronomist. I guess we still teach Agronomy. That's agriculture science, particularly as related to efficiencies. You can sort of see the word economics and agriculture in agronomy. |
|  | My interest growing up, I was fascinated by science, hard science. I was fascinated by electricity and electronics. Dad had no facility with those sorts of things or interested in them but he so encouraged us whenever we had an interest. He went and built me a little laboratory outbuilding. We called it the electric house. Dad would buy these kits that I would somehow identify and patiently work with me to wire them up and so one of the earliest leadership lessons there was how it is that, and it hit me again and again through my career, how it is that good leaders and good mentors are so excited by and satisfied by and seek satisfaction in the growth of their mentees, if that is such a word, of those a mentor. |
|  | I’m not sure I showed much of a proclivity toward good leadership. I was in the Boy Scouts and when you got long in the tooth in the Boy Scouts, you had a cracked, you had an opportunity at least in our troop, a very large and active troop in Silver Spring Maryland, to be a junior assistant scoutmaster. You ran Scout meetings and organized activities. I could run a meeting pretty well, make sure it started and stopped on time and we got through all the agenda items and each patrol made its report and these sorts of things, but I was generally disappointed at the turnouts of events that I would organize. |
|  | People just didn't seem to show up and my, I remember my scoutmaster, my father told me this later, the scoutmaster told my dad, he said, "You know, Jim’s problem is that he expects everybody else to be as conscientious as he is," and I thought that was one of the most affirming criticisms. Remember, he was acknowledging I stunk at the job but he was trying to say that I expected greater conscientiousness from others, but the fact remains, I don’t think I was very good at that role. |
|  | I went off to the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware to study electrical engineering and it turned out to be as sweet an experiences as I hoped it would be. I enjoyed the coursework, took on some extracurricular work in engineering as well. It was an interesting time in engineering. In fact, we were required before we showed up to be prepared to be facile on one of two, the option was up to us, but one of two slide rules. It wasn't until my senior year that we were permitted, those that could've afforded them, to bring calculators to exams. |
|  | I also worked in the sports era, did athletic training. I've taped more ankles and knees and shoulders and wrists and thumbs at the University of Delaware for those Fighting Blue Hands, but it was a great experience. Two, actually course content, two elements of course content have stuck with me for a long time. I like to think a lot have. Most of that is not terribly useful. I can actually design a vacuum tube amplifier and a single transistor amplifier of several different kinds. |
|  | My digital electronics we thought was running at lightning speed at 14 MHz, so that seemed to be less, maybe less valuable today than some of more fundamental things. There were two fundamental things that come to mind with regard to leadership. One, believe it or not, was Fourier theory, F-O-U-R-I-E-R. The Fourier Transform is something that just clicked for me. It is a mathematical way to describe signals, signals that occur in time: Is it high? Is it low? It was a way to describe signals in a different domain than time. |
|  | The point to be made is, there's mathematical relationship, the transform relationship, that goes back and forth between the time domain and the Fourier frequency phase domain and it's easier to work to do some things in one domain than it is to do some things in another domain. It came pretty quickly to me and in fact, I felt I could help others to grasp it as well but I bring it up in this context because the philosophical component of it, being able to understand that exactly the same reality can be described and experienced in two different perspectives- Well, why not 22 or 222 different perspectives? -And that depending on the perspective and history and background, it might be easier to manage some reality in a different world, in a different space or from a different perspective than I have. |
|  | Probably make reference to this multiple times, but it became apparent to me that there were certain issues that the humanists, those more deeply educated in the liberal arts, understood with greater facility than I did with my linear engineering. One plus one has to equal two and I’ll take that two and I'll integrate it over time and bang, bang, bang, bang, bang and we'll work our way down. I envied the liberal arts folks who lived, it seemed to me, instead of a linear world, a more parallel world where it was important for them to pay attention to things out on the edges of at least my peripheral vision. |
|  | I got to thinking, "Maybe that’s okay, even from an engineering perspective," because in my own transform world that I was just telling you about, it may be that from their world, there were certain problems and projects that were going to be better addressed, certain opportunities that were going to be identified and pursued in a way that an engineer or scientist wouldn't do. |
|  | The other piece of engineering education that kept coming up came out of a course I took in decision theory. I actually took this at the Masters level, but I assume they still teach decision theory courses. These are trees of each fork in the road and you assign a probability of success to one fork versus another fork and then it encounters another fork and then it encounters, and eventually you decide which is the best decision tree path going forward. That was the formulaic side of it, but the point that stuck with me and continues to stick with me was this description, that's germane to leadership, was this description about the difference between the best decision and the right decision. |
|  | This course reinforced that. They taught that the best decision is a decision that you make at the time with the information you have available and as much of it as you can possibly gather, but only history, only time would tell whether that best decision was a right decision. It told me a lot about risk. I was going to say, there are some folks that feel they can't make a decision unless they're certain it’s the right decision. That usually means you won’t make a decision because for the best decision to be the right decision, the element of risk, the element of time has to go to zero. In other words, you should be making, you can only make your decision at the time it’s absolutely certain and it’s right or wrong. Often, you’re forced into that decision. |
|  | To make a best decision requires accepting some risk and I can point to times when my best decisions were wrong. The one that pops into mind now has to do with a personnel decision. Somebody, someone I would’ve hired and felt brilliantly about and had done all the referencing, gotten all the information and the best decision was to hire this person and only to discover a couple of years later that it was the wrong decision for that person and for me and for the organization and have to fix it. |
|  | People have said often, "Oh, I bet you wish you hadn’t hired someone so." I said, "Well, of course," and they would talk about what led to the decision and in that conversation, I would have to say, "And if we rolled time back again, I'd make exactly the same decision," because it was a best decision. It just turned out to be wrong based on information I couldn’t have at the time. The engineering education, the linear thinking, the sense that a world can be described in different ways, and this notion of, "You'll never know it all and you'd better just go ahead and make a decision, the best one you know how," stuck with me for a long time and that was through my education. |
|  | I left, after my bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from the University of Delaware, I went to work for the Food and Drug Administration. A new law had just been passed, treating medical devices the same way that drugs had been treated. It was a great opportunity to help set up a laboratory. It was the lab dimension of that that I was working, so I was a lab rat for nine years. I worked for a gentleman Ed [Mueller 00:23:40] who, a lot like my father, valued creativity and would say, "Well, if you think that's something you ought to go after, go for it." |
|  | He also sent me back to school, which also pleased my father by the way, and so I did evening part time. Well, it wasn’t just evening because once I got to the Master’s thesis, it took a lot of time in biomedical, actually it was clinical engineering, a degree that was very hospital-focused and equipment-focused provided by the biomedical engineering department at Johns Hopkins University. Finished my Master's and continued to work with Food and Drug Administration and we began another sort of partnership also at Johns Hopkins University. |
|  | They had a material science organization that was actually looking at doing some bio materials work. My boss wanted some of that work to be done in Washington and so he spoke with the department chair there, or at least the head of the NDE, Non-Destructive Evaluation activity, and that fella said, "Yeah. I'll put a postdoc or graduate student in the FDA labs and help you build that lab. You need to send this guy who’s doing optical materials characterization," that's what I was doing. I was doing during laser work fused my electrical engineering with the materials, "And send this guy who's doing that to help us set up a lab in Baltimore at the Hopkins campus," so I had an alternate duty station up there. |
|  | The head of that program, a fella named Bob Greene, also another one of these, like my dad, like Ed Mueller, who just took great joy out of seeing other people succeed. He came to me and he said, "Have you ever thought of going after PhD degree," and I said, "Yeah. I have actually, Bob and I’m not going to do it." He said, "Why is that?" I said, "I really enjoy what I’m doing. I’m growing here. Ed Mueller made sure I go off to at least deliver a paper, not just attend a conference a year, but deliver a paper. I'm writing about one scientific paper a year," and I said, "Besides, the work I’m engaged with right now," and by the way, it was looking at pacemakers and the hermetic seals and pacemakers using an optical method, never to touch them. It was a fascinating approach, which ended up having no commercial use, but nevertheless it was fascinating. |
|  | I said, "I'd like to finish this," and he said, "Suppose I told you that the work you're doing here could be your dissertation research." I said, "Well, then we better talk," so while I had multiple days each week of alternate duty station in Baltimore at the Johns Hopkins University, I began taking courses. I enrolled in the PhD program. I was closing in and completing that under Bob Greene's tutelage. Bob came back down, he came to the lab, lucky room 13, and he said, "Jim, you know, we have an opening for professor, an assistant professor in the department." |
|  | I said, "Yeah, I know. I’ve been going to the lecture." They would bring in these folks to lecture the candidates and I said, "I've been going to them." He said, "Have you thought about throwing your hat in the ring?" I gave him the same answer. I said, "Yeah, Bob. I thought about it. I'm not going to do it," and he said, he asked, "Why not?" Well, to make a long story short, he insisted that I should and in fact, I was chosen and that was the beginning of my academic career. |
|  | I had spent nine years with Food and Drug Administration. I would ultimately spend 13 years at Johns Hopkins and come up through the academic ranks, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor. I had multiple, I enjoyed teaching. I really enjoyed teaching and it wasn’t just laying out the facts I enjoyed. I played a little with the students and enjoyed when I'd get them to think. |
|  | It was interesting. In one of the classes I taught, which was a large introductory class, when you became more senior you could teach introductory classes and your graduate classes and you could kind of pick them. I told them I didn’t want to teach any new class that I didn’t get to teach for three years. The first year to work up the content. The second to polish and then after a third, I could enjoy it, but I ran some experiments early. |
|  | In one of the big lectures I was teaching, I gave an exam ... By the way, I learned that I needed to give multiple exams and early. I was criticized for having an affable style, but terribly difficult exams and so I would try always to give that first exam because I couldn't change my style [inaudible 00:28:43], but I would always give that first exam before the drop-add date so the students could decide. I ran an experiment and I gave that first exam as a multiple-choice exam. I gave the second exam. I would typically give three exams and a final. |
|  | The second exam I gave as a problem set exam and the distribution of achievement on those exams was different. In other words, different students did well on one exam versus the other exam. Roughly speaking, and very roughly speaking, the multiple choice folks who could really crush those exams went on, often thought they would go on to be medical students. They were premed students. I think it might be a very good thing. I would like a doctor to have memorized a lot of stuff. |
|  | Those that were more inclined in the engineering direction, in the science direction, did better on the problem solving. It was an interesting, there was overlap obviously, but it was an interesting thing, so I kept trying to find elements, ways to make people think and learn. The opportunity opened for me to teach the introductory materials lab which people really didn’t take until their sophomore and junior year, and really at the suggestion of some of the others. I don't know who came up with the idea. I'd love to claim it because it was brilliant but it wasn’t my idea, I don't believe, but it did come to me. |
|  | They asked, "Do you want to try to design a lab like this?" The lab was one where I designed every experiment to fail. Every one of them failed and it was to get at this issue that we’ve talked about before. Biases that rely on a consistency. Gee, every book I've read says this. The answers in the back of the book say this. By the way, there were no tricks to why they failed. I did a bending beam experiment. One week they would put sensors on it. Maybe that's not the best way to describe it, but something as simple as a bending beam experiment and the reason it failed, what they were to look at was the low deflection curve. |
|  | I made the beam larger in width, in thickness than the infinitesimally thin beam that is in the back of your physics book. The first two weeks were wonderful because these kids just struggled and strained to make sure their answer somehow lined up where they had an excuse for why the laboratory observation was wrong. We had some the liveliest sessions after that because I would have then a session. In fact, I remember one time one of the secretaries coming out and shutting the door to the lecture room where we were having this session because it had gotten so loud and it was so wonderful. |
|  | She laughed actually, when talked about it later but it was disturbing people down the hall. The next lab was one we did with a Coca-Cola can. Have to say Coca-Cola in Atlanta and happily, it was a Coca-Cola can. Everybody got a Coca-Cola can and they put strain gauges around the Coca-Cola can, some to measure the longitudinal strain, barrel bows out like this, some to measure the radial strain, it bows out like this. Then you [psh 00:32:21] pop the can and because the thing will collapse a little bit, you would measure that strain, measure the thickness of the aluminum and figure out the pressure inside the can. It was that easy. |
|  | Failed almost every time and the reason it fails is, the reason it fails is when you deep draw aluminum, its stiffness profile, if you will, as you go around the perimeter, if you can image it and by the way, in a subsequent we did image it holographically, if you could image it, the coke can shrinks and expands like a pumpkin. It's got segments. The likelihood that you would get a longitudinal stress and a hoop stress measurement, a radial hoop stress measurement, on the same section of this pumpkin was pretty low so I knew the experiment would fail. |
|  | They then realized all of them were going to fail and it turned into just a terrific lab experience. It was fun to teach and they got to do the detective work and they began to trust measurement and observation over theory and bias. It was cool and for me, it developed ... I also did a lot of my research at the time. A lot, I guess I did all of it. I kind of came to a screeching halt when I left Johns Hopkins, but my research, I enjoyed the discipline of hypothesis-driven research. This is where you say, "I think this is going to happen and I need to design an experiment that either verifies that or at least it covers all of the bases of possibility for failure of that hypothesis." |
|  | Really what I was trying to teach these kids was that same thing. Think about all the things that might not fit your hypothesis and test for that, hypothesis-driven research. You've got to let a hypothesis go. Obviously, it's your preferred outcome. You say, "I think this is what's going to happen," but you can’t take too much pride in it because you'll ignore some important information." |
|  | Several PhD students I educated, one PhD student, we awarded him a PhD for dissertation on a completely failed hypothesis. It's a little unusual to do, but I think we were able to demonstrate that nobody would ever, that he had done the experiments, that the hypothesis, perfectly plausible hypothesis, perfectly possible, but he had done the key experiments that show that it was dead wrong. We were pretty convinced that no one else, there was no foundation for anyone else ever to prove that hypothesis, so it was a good dissertation. It would keep people from going down a blind alley. |
|  | At Johns Hopkins that also was an important growth and learning phase for me about teaching, about research, about helping students to achieve and to discover. I became chairman of the department, I don't think I was a very good chairman. I became chairman of the department and in the fifth year of that ... Well, in the fifth year of that, I'd actually had some health issues and some other things. In fact, that reminds me to go back to family. |
|  | I talked about my dad a lot and my parents. I mentioned my brothers, but my wife. She and I met in high school, Debbie. We were introduced by my older brother and her older sister who are dating at the time and ultimately went on to be married. Debbie and I dated in high school. We weren't married until the year she graduated from college. She was a year younger than I, so we dated over six years. I just celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. |
|  | She comes to mind when I start integrating the personal and the professional and realize how important it is to have an example of someone who accepts and cares for you regardless of your best decisions not being right decisions, regardless of mistakes, who accepts apology and believes in your sincerity. There was something very Christlike about that kind of love and I have received that from Debbie all along and continue to. I am blessed by that. |
|  | Left Johns Hopkins and at the bitter end, December 1997, there was nothing bitter about the departure because I was asked to be Dean of engineering at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. At Case Western Reserve, I learned something about vision that is telling people what you thought could be and could happen. I remember doing two things that were unusual in the interview process. |
|  | First of all, I wasn’t intending to be excited by this. My dad, wise man, said, "You should always let other people close your windows of opportunity," and what that meant is when you had an opportunity, you should let other people tell you it’s a dumb thing to do whether it's an interviewing body like a search committee or it's colleagues. I really put it to use before coming to Emory, put that phrase to use, but I also put a phrase to use there. I had about every couple or three years, I've been asked to interview somewhere and I was very open with people and I also would ... It helped me in my assessment process to prepare a three-part letter, most of it written ahead of time. |
|  | It was again to try to determine whether or not this was a real opportunity. The three-part letter, the first part was, "What do I think Case Western Reserve University, Emory University is wonderfully good at?" The second part is, "What do I think their opportunities are," and that’s a euphemistic way of saying, "Where do they have problems?" The third paragraph is why I'd be the wrong person for the job. I’d been able write that letter for an opportunity at the Pentagon. I wrote that letter for an opportunity at another University I won't mention and I'd prepared that letter for Case Western Reserve. |
|  | By the way, to complete that letter, there’s always some blanks so that standard part of every interview when they said, "Do you have any questions for us," it was easy. I said, "Yeah. I've got a bunch of questions. I've got to finish this letter." Now, they didn't know that but at Case Western Reserve, visioning became important to me and even in going into the interview, really fun engineers were pigeonholed. To this day when they talk about engineers, others talk about engineers, they say, "You know, engineers are problem solvers," and I was uncomfortable with that definition as a partial definition. |
|  | I guess that's a way of saying I’m not comfortable with the definition. The reason is when you just say, "Problem solvers," they're going to be solving somebody else’s problem, somebody. I think, I had this vision for engineers becoming problem identifiers, problem definers and then problem solvers. To be a problem identifier, you had to be in society. We need to come back to that, but you had to be in society so you had to know more than just engineering. You had to be beyond Dilbert in the comics. |
|  | Societal engagement of our engineers, I thought was going to be absolutely critical for the future, engineering and the future of technology. It's proven to be the case. I think you would say Steve Jobs, technology leader, was more in tune with society’s needs for technology than with how to design the technology that was needed so I think that turned out to be true. I took the interview and I got that other standard question, but I had these things in my mind why I was probably the wrong person for the job and a vision for engineering should be. I shouldn't call it my vision, a vision for engineering should be. |
|  | I got that other standard question, "Why do you want to be a Dean?" I just blurted, I said, "I don't want to be a Dean. I want to get this accomplished. These are the things that need to be accomplished. Our students understanding and the engineering world understanding what it means to be in the world, identifying the needs of the world, seeking out great opportunities and not being just problem solvers and if I've got to be a Dean to do that, I'll accept it." I was pretty sure I'd blown the interview at that point, which was okay because it was worth writing a letter, although I got excited that night and it wasn’t so. |
|  | I got up early in the morning and I hand wrote this vision piece for what I thought could happen at Case Western Reserve that they could be and actually be recognized for excellence in engineering education where excellence was defined in a certain way. I had that hand written and I came to my interview the next morning and it was with the full team and I’d asked the assistant there if they could copy multiple copies for this. I walked through that and it stuck. I became excited and they became excited. |
|  | There were two leadership things there, one very directly related to engineering and the other not that came out of my experience there. The one directly related to engineering is the notion of engineering as team members. Engineers really, really are. Come on, we have come through this enormous, team workers, we’ve come through this enormous period of growth of technology. You and I remember the dial phone. You and I remember a cord that wasn’t even curled when it came out of the phone, carbon microphones and things like that. |
|  | What an explosion of technological advance, and yet I’m not sure that there are many people, certainly people that I bump into day after day after day, who can tell me who their favorite engineer is, who they're most proud of as an engineer and who really do you tribute? It really wasn’t Al Gore, developing internet but who’s your favorite engineer? They blank and for good reason. |
|  | Engineers know that the magnitude of the problems that, and opportunities to be pursued and problems to be solved, are such that you need teams and so they bring the best person to do this job and the best person ... If we're going to land on the moon, we need somebody who knows something about solid rocket booster motors and we're going to come back. We need somebody that knows something about ablative heat shields. We need this and we need that. You bring these people together in a team and you assign responsibility. You give it away. It’s not about tasking. It’s about delegating. |
|  | The result is that the job doesn’t get done because of any one person. By the way, the byproduct of that intensity of team relationship is nerdism, engineering nerds that fuel the Dilbert comics are those of us who do that. We realize that we get our biggest pats on the head by taking our wedge of the mission pie and doing it better than anyone else and doing it in such a way that everybody relies on us and they say, "Dick, good job. Jim, great job," and it's a bit of hyperbole to say that the team probably doesn’t care if outside of that circle you happen to be an ax murderer. That’s too much hyperbole, but the point is we don’t care much about the person when we operate in that mode. We just care about what they can deliver. |
|  | If that's what I'm getting rewarded on every day, that’s what I'm going to invest my mental energies into and I’m going to be a pretty boring person on a date or at a cocktail party. Another reason engineers needed to get out of that mode. I've called it subsequently and in fact, I’m afraid there are several at Emory who would know exactly what I was talking about if I mentioned the Volkswagen technique. We needed to, at Case Western Reserve, completely redesign and redirect funds that were used to support graduate students. We were, at the time, supporting a huge number of Master's degree students, which is wonderful but we were using them mostly as teaching assistants and we were starving for money for PhD students where you need the PhD students to be in the labs with the creative ideas and the creative work in order to advance science. You want a lot of those Master students to become PhD students. |
|  | There's a major overhaul being proposed. I was proposing and I gathered the entire faculty together from all the departments I said, "Look, I want to explain to you what I think we could do." I said, "But let me start with a story that I believe might be true, and that is if I asked all of us assembled here to design a really fast race car, I think we could do it. I think everything from the mechanics of the suspension to the chemistry of the tires and combustion to the electronics to the physic, all that, I think we could do it, but I’m betting you would do it faster and just as effectively if I first rolled in a Volkswagen, my Volkswagen. |
|  | I designed it, and said, 'Make a fast race car out of this. Not make a fast race car out of a vacuum but make a fast race car out of this,' and you would hit your heads and say, 'Well, the aerodynamics are all wrong, so we need to change the body.' Someone would say the wheelbase and someone would say the engine and someone would say the weight distribution and suspension and bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. I think you'd be more focused if I gave you something to criticize." |
|  | I said, "And the only hard job about that is I have to say I don't mind being criticized," so I said, "With that background, I would like to present to you," and we were using overhead projector slides at the time, "I would like to present to you my Volkswagen for how we should re-budget for greater PhD student support. I will tell you also, it is to satisfy hypothesis that we should have more and better paid PhD students and because it’s a hypothesis and this is an experiment, if in three years, we don’t have those, I promise to, we'll go back." |
|  | Went through the Volkswagen, got some good tweaking and I think I got it, I guess it's not unanimous. I had no opposing votes, but I noticed I had some abstentions but overwhelmingly, they said, "Let’s do this." It made a great impression on me that maybe some of the creativity can be imperfect from a leader if they’ll acknowledge that they expect it to be perfected by others and can roll out in a Volkswagen to compete in the Indianapolis 500. Expecting that you’ve surrounded yourself with others and the organization itself, as such, they will convert it. Those were two things I took from the Case Western Reserve experience. |
|  | I was called one day, Case Western Reserve had a search for a Provost and it appeared to be successful. It identified someone from another Eastern state. At the last minute, there was a health issue in this individual's family and they just couldn't accept the job. I got a call from the president and he said, "I need you to come down to the office." I rehearsed all the way across campus how it would be a bad idea for me to be the interim Provost because the interim Provost, the engineering school was on the edge of something and being interim Provost would tear me from that and not only that, it would tempt me to have feet in both. |
|  | I got in there and he sat me down and David said, "Jim, I'd like you to be the Provost of Case Western Reserve University," and I said, "Well, you know, taking time off as an interim Provost isn’t going to work." He said, "You didn’t hear me." He said, "I want you to be the Provost, not the interim Provost." I hadn't rehearsed that so I said, "How much time do I have to decide?" He said, "Until Friday," and I said I would think about it. He said, "What’s to think about? Your boss is telling you to do this so it's essentially an order." |
|  | It was being thrown in deep water. I told you I admired ... Remember what the Provost is, I’m sorry. The Provost is the chief academic of a university. Every Dean reports to the Provost. That’s the Dean of the fine arts departments and the Dean of the physics department and the Dean ... I mean, not department. Fine arts school, the Dean of the engineering school, the Dean of the medical school, all these are reporting to this Provost. |
|  | I thought about it and I told him I would do it but I have a very steep learning curve and I set about to learn. Eight months later, so I took the job. It was a September 1. Eight months later, in April, his assistant came barging into my office on a Friday afternoon. It was right after lunch and she was intense. She said, "You know, the president has quit," and I said, "Well, it's Friday afternoon." She said, "No, no, no. He’s quit," and she burst into tears. |
|  | There had been tension between president and the board and really irreconcilable differences. I think both of them came to an understanding that it wasn't going to work going forward, and very abruptly the president resigned. He ... For his own indisputable reasons, he was gone. The bylaws of the institution read that the Provost became the acting president, not the chairman of the board or any, the Provost became the acting president. It fell to me having been Provost for only eight months, having far from mastery of that position, "Would I now serve as president?" |
|  | There wasn't a question. That was the assignment. It was interesting. There was a alumni event, it was a Friday, an alumni dinner or something. I walked over to the alumni dinner and I addressed the alumni. I said, "I'm really going to need your help." I then immediately assembled every Dean. I put them all together in a room. I said, "Look guys and gals," I said, "It was only eight months ago I was Dean and I know if this had happened while I was Dean, this was a great opportunity to swindle the front office because there's just no way the front office can keep in touch with what you’re doing." I said, "Would you do me a favor and would you give me maybe just two months and pretend that you’re the Provost, pretend that these shoes are on your feet and just for two months, would you please and I will bring you into the confidences, in Provostial confidences, now that I'm president," and all these kind of things. |
|  | I said, "But I just, Case Western Reserve needs your help." They gave me 15 months. It was remarkable. I learned that trust, telling somebody you trust them, is a far more powerful motivator than telling somebody they're under threat. Inviting somebody into your trust, exchanging trust, building a trust bank, was a huge leadership lesson. Anyway, I just admired what they did. We went on, by the way, the search for a new president took 15 months. We went on very quickly. We identified president proof objectives for the University. These were objectives. The definition was, I worked with all the Dean's and Provost staff and I said, "The definition is that these objectives have to be objectives that any president that's going to be hired is going to do, not something we think ought to be done and not something we sure hope the next one will do, but any president is going to come here and say, 'I'm so glad you’ve done those things.'" |
|  | There were 10 of them, it turned out. I presented them to the Board of Trustees and in each meeting, executive committee or full board, I would give the status and we began to check these things off, these president proof objectives. I was able to hand the next president something that was good. It was one of those things because I had invited the contribution or because everybody had participated in it, one of those things that the Dean's seemed to, maybe they were just good, just generally kind people, but they really seemed to think also these were good things for themselves and the University and they worked toward. Quite a leadership lesson there. |
|  | The only other thing that comes to mind, a lot of things come to mind, of that experience was 9/11, was during that time. I was actually visiting with the president of the Cleveland Clinic at the time and I was in his office. They came running in and the TV went on and I decided I'd better get back to campus. I made a call immediately and I said, "Please gather all the Deans," and all the Deans were gathered when I got there. What people don’t recall, not that they should, is Cleveland had panicked and was in a state of understandable panic. The plane that went down in Pennsylvania, is that flight 91? Whatever it was, the plane that went down in Pennsylvania flew over Cleveland and turned around over Cleveland to come down. |
|  | We knew ... The mayor had secured, shutdown the city and I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I’m going to go around the table once. I want you to know, I just want to hear whether or not we should close the University in one sentence why," and I said, "At the end, there's not going to be a discussion. I'll make a decision." Remember gathering information to assess consensus is not necessarily a democratic process. It advises a leadership process. |
|  | Went around the table and I said, "Okay, I hear you and really very helpful and here's what we're going to do. We're going to send a message. We are not going to close the University." I said, "First of all, sending every student back to dorms, it's a largely residential campus. They're no more concentrated a target on the quad than they are in the dorms. We're not going to do that, so there's not a risk. Secondly, we want to not close the University along with a statement that says that we won’t yield to terrorism and thirdly, we'll give permission to every supervisor to send any distressed individual home with no penalty." We essentially closed the University, but we made this very proud statement that we had not, and while I laugh at that now, it was actually important at the time. |
|  | I had been a candidate for the full-time presidency and was not selected. Once you get your name out there though and a search firms has your name in their files, on their Rolodex at the time, you begin to get approached. I was approached by a couple of other universities after serving 15 months there. I thought I would give the new president of the year. I got the call from Emory and from someone I really trust us. She’s deceased, Paula [Karidebelis 00:58:07] who was a search consultant that I’d use multiple times had just really, you talk about someone of integrity, somebody you could count on. They'll do the same thing under the same circumstances and was honest. |
|  | She said, "I think you ought to look at this job at Emory." I said, "Well, I don't know Emery University very well." My parents actually had moved to Atlanta years and years prior. After I was out of house, they had moved to Atlanta and I had visited Atlanta. They talked about Emory, but I knew very little about it. I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, Paula. I'll call you back in a couple days. I'm pretty sure I'm going to tell you no," and she said, "What are you going to do in those next couple of days?" I said, "Well, I'm going to exercise this piece I told you about earlier, my father saying, 'Let other people close your windows of opportunity.'" |
|  | She said, "I don't know what that means," and I said, "What that means in this case is I'm going to call a couple people and the people that care about me, people that care about higher education, they'll look at these circumstances. Come on, the circumstances are such that I've got a brand-new president and I’ve been kind of enjoying the teamwork, they’re holding his feet down to the ground. He had ideas up in the stratosphere." My wife had a job at the time. She was doing Christian education at our local church and loved that. |
|  | One daughter was out of high school but I had a rising senior in high school, so I'm going to call people. I'm going to explain this to them and they’ll tell me no and they will close my window of opportunity. It’s that simple. First person I called is still a good friend, Tom Buresh. Tom is now the Provost at Notre Dame. He was longtime Provost at Vanderbilt. That’s how I got to know him. Then became president at Washington Lee and I called him at Washington Lee. He had been a mentor for me, continues to be. |
|  | I said, "Tom, here’s my opportunity." He said, "It's funny you should call, Jim." He said, "I chaired the 10 year reaccreditation of Emory University just this last year, last academic year." He said, "I think that thing really lays well for you. You ought to look at it," and I said, "Tom, the timing is wrong," and I explained rising senior, this, that and the other. He said, "Now Jim," listen to this. You talk about wisdom. He says, "You know bad things never happen when you want them to." I said, "Oh course not." He said, "So why do you think good things should?" |
|  | He said, "This is a good thing happening when you don't want it to." I hung up. Next person I called was Frank Rhodes and I mentioned Frank to you, this fellow who'd been president at Cornell, 18 years. Marvelous, marvelous brain, just a good man. He said, "Jim, it's funny you should call. Emory has reached out to me and asked me to serve as a consultant to their search and I was going to call and nominate you. I think it sits very well for you," so I called Paula Karidebelis back, the headhunter search advisor and I said, "Paula, now I am going to come for a single interview, also based on my father’s aphorism or assertion that I should let other people close windows of opportunity because I couldn’t get it to happen." I said, "But I tell you, it doesn’t feel good. I don’t think it's going to be right but on principle, I will come for one interview." |
|  | Of course, it really got under my skin studying up on this place, trying to write that letter that I couldn't complete. Came here in the fall of 2003, so much to say about learning at Emory, learning about what is fundamental. I was able to exercise the trust factor, process of working with cabinet-level leaders where I would ask them, not tell them but ask them, "What are you going to do this year?" They would give me a list of opportunities and issues. I asked that it be broken up into opportunities and issues because issues are easy to identify. It's also easy to work on an issue day after day after day and go home and think you've done a good day's work. |
|  | Opportunities are those things that you have to come up with, that you have to create, you have to cause your own trouble and that’s what moves the institution forward more than just treading water. I used to say, "If you deal with issues all the time, it’s like the boat owner who spends all their time below the decks patching the leaks," has to get every single leak patched before they would go up and navigate the boat anywhere. A successful person who operates that way will end up with a boat that’s afloat, but adrift. |
|  | Big leaks, you've got to attend to, run down below and take care of them, but you've got to let a few little leaks go so you can navigate go forward somewhere. It was a negotiation process. It is ... Well, it was now, with those leaders. I thought we’d start with that for a couple years. It stuck for 13 years. The opps and issues list, I asked them to be short. I asked them to spend no more than 45 minutes on it, just [pft 01:03:10], "What do you think you're going to get done in this year?" We negotiate and that's where I could say, "Yeah, I thought we would do this or that." |
|  | I would ask them to put something in there for personal growth. The Volkswagen thing stuck. In fact, I found others at the cabinet-level coming in saying, "You know, I've got a Volkswagen on this of an idea," and we'd refine it and pursue it. I continued to learn a huge amount about the humanities. What is a liberal arts education all about? We usually stopped short of a full definition. We say, "Liberal arts education is about educating critical thinkers." It is. That critical thinker is someone who can listen, someone who can process based on their experience, who can reformulate or refine the idea and articulate it. That’s a critical thinker in the broadest sense, but I think those who can be ... If you’re looking for the marks of liberal learning in yourself, I think critical thinking is one. |
|  | Broad interest, being able to read more than one section of a newspaper, including the appreciation for the aesthetic is important. Third is character. The liberally educated is someone who is pulling virtues and building them into their lives. The virtues may evolve and whatnot but they are establishing their own identity, not the identity that they're given by some gang or fraternity or political party but their own identity and then finding it's congruent with some political movement, but not the lazy way of acquiring by membership your character, but developing character. |
|  | I learned a lot about listening. Too often today, listening is waiting for your turn to talk and imagining that somebody else could be right. This took me back to this Fourier theory argument that there may be different ways to look at things where what to do next or even a strategy or tactic could be much better looking at it from another dimension. It's a real argument for diversity and I learned a lot about diversity with more to learn, but diversity at a university, and it should be in all our lives, is not something that's tolerated. It's something that's required. |
|  | Pick a hobby you have or something professional you have ... Abraham Lincoln, if you want to study Abraham Lincoln and say, tell to people you're a student of Abraham Lincoln, you need to understand Abraham Lincoln from as many different perspectives as possible. You need to know what his mother thought about him. You need to know what his colleagues thought about him. You need to know what plantation owners and slaves thought. You can’t say with integrity that you've studied Abraham Lincoln unless you've studied as many different dimensions as possible. |
|  | That diversity of perspectives then becomes absolutely required for you to say with integrity that you know something about this situation. It's not something you [tell 01:06:30], "Okay, I'll let that thought in." It reinforces what so many have said, but I guess I didn't really experience it until seeing these kinds of things. So many have said that you want to invite people in your circle who have different perspectives from you, different backgrounds and race, religion, all those things that we list, intellectual that if you're really going to try to make best decisions, you'd better have information from as many different directions as possible. |
|  | Actually, it was in that category of diversity that I had one of my most celebrated failures. This probably is celebrated. I guess maybe there were some that celebrated, some most visible personal leadership failure. I'm going to come back and talk about what I think was actually a more important leadership challenge for the University, but this was leadership failure. That was when I would write an essay, about four times a year, write an essay in the alumni magazine. I wrote an essay in every issue of the alumni magazine. It came out quarterly. |
|  | This particular issue was dealing with compromise. I was just agitated about what was happening in Washington and the lack of understanding the value of compromise. What I was writing on, which you have to squeeze it into six or seven hundred words, was that we compromise on interests very easily. If you are selling me a car, it’s in your interest to get a lot of money for it and in my interest to pay a little money for it. Nevertheless, we'll know pretty soon whether or not we're going to have a transaction and we will compromise on our interests, do it all the time. |
|  | Compromise that involves principle, that’s hard. If I asked just about anybody if they think it’s right to kill another person, they'll say, "No." Then if I asked that same group if they've ever been in military, would they consider joining the military, would they accept when the draft was around, would you be drafted into the military? Very large fraction will say, "Yes." I say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Your principle is you told me you wouldn’t kill people, but you'd go into the military. Are you going to go into some branch that doesn’t kill people?" There are conscientious objectors. |
|  | The fact is that when we identify a greater good and we are really committed to that greater good, we compromise even on principle. My big mistake, my deafness, my ineptness, what does somebody call it ... Cultural incompetence was I didn't war and death as an example. I used the [freak 01:09:31] three-fifths compromise in our Constitution, and neither I nor the similarly-minded people who edited that realized how that episode in American history over time, and for very good reasons, is villainous in so much of the African American community. |
|  | I should’ve known that. I should’ve had, I should’ve known it. I should’ve had that measure of diversity represented in making decisions to write about it. It was a leadership failure. Not only did I learn from that and you can never say you've learned absolutely, but I’ve learned and have found from time to time the value of engaging people with different perspectives on those issues. I learned something else or reaffirmed maybe something else and that was the difference between apology and excuse. |
|  | I wrote an apology or what I thought was an apology, immediately posted it. Immediately, that's not true. It went out, it was published, it was a couple, maybe over a month before there was this buildup of, "What in the world? How insulting of the president of a major research university to have used this and how inept." The apology was two paragraphs. The first paragraph was saying "Oh, my gosh. I am sorry. I certainly do not support slavery." By the way Emory had courageously, courageously acknowledged just a year before, months before, its role in slavery and its regret for Emory’s role in slavery. |
|  | We actually had kind of scoured our history. We had issued an apology for anti-Semitism. There were some horrible illustration of anti-Semitism in our dental school. All these things can be looked up, so harking back to that, I was able I guess with some credibility to say very honestly, "I apologize." You know from past action and past words that I do not support oppression, the injustices associated with the race and the ultimate injustice of slavery. |
|  | Then I had a second paragraph and I said, "But what I was trying to say is..." and I went on to do pretty much what you and I talked about. That was not received well. The apology was not received well. I realized that I'd done what I'd done most of my life and what I think many people do is confused apology with excuse. An excuse is one where I try to give the other person who’s upset with me a reason. I try to reason with them. My dog ate my homework. My grandmother died again or whatever it is, there's some reason for this. I was trying to illustrate the difference between compromising on principle and compromising on interests and that’s what I was trying to do. |
|  | Please understand and excuse me. I took the second paragraph down. I'd only changed a word in the first paragraph and realized that I just needed to apologize for having done something wrong. I needed to give others an opportunity to forgive me, so long as I was making an excuse I had taken away their opportunity to forgive. Some haven’t been able to do that. Overwhelmingly, people have and I’m grateful for that and I've learned that leaders at times are going to be wrong. |
|  | By the way, that was not a best decision. I didn’t have all the input I should’ve sought to do that and I simply did something wrong. Sometimes you can recover from those for the sake of the organization, sometimes you can’t. I’m pleased that the organization permitted me to recover from that. It wasn’t without one of our ... Well, there was some other controversy on campus at the time and one of our schools actually called for a no-confidence vote. It was one that actually at which I was affirmed. The impact was, "Boy, if they are going to allow after that sort of thing that they feel, that the institution feels, it can continue to trust my leadership, I'm going to double down. I'm going to work really hard on justifying that trust." |
|  | Emory was the first time I felt challenged about my identity. You take the job and people call you the president of the University and these amazing opportunities open up, a monthly breakfast with President Jimmy Carter in the owner’s box of whatever sports event. I went to an opportunity to be on a presidential commission, or just the rich get richer kind of thing. Then the question was, "Do people really care about Jim Wagner or do they care about the president at Emory? Who am I?" |
|  | At Case Western Reserve, we were about to go, the country was deciding whether or not to engage in the Gulf War. It was a hot topic and it was hot on campuses. I got a call from a local newspaper journalist, "What's the university’s opinion on this?" She may as well been asking about abortion or any of a number of other controversial issues. I said, "The University has a firm opinion that there are too few places for people with violently opposed views to engage nonviolently and our opinion is that we need to be a place where people can come and argue this thing, that ideas need to do battle." |
|  | She's like, "I get that. I get that. I know that." She said, "But how about you? I know the University has to say that. How about you? What's your view? Should we go into the Gulf War?" I said, "I am flattered that you are interested in Jim Wagner, man on the street, and his particular opinion about whether or not to go enter the Gulf War entirely independent of the position I serve at the University and that’s how your title would read, right? That Jim Wagner who lives in Shaker Heights thinks this, or would it say that the president of the University thinks this even though you’ve asked me to answer as Jim Wagner." |
|  | She laughed. She said, "You're not going to answer, are you?" I said, "No, I'm not going to answer and I’m paid not to answer. I am paid not to have an opinion. People shouldn't know what political party I affiliate most closely with. People shouldn’t know these feelings, these opinions." By the time I came to Emory I had adopted a practice for me, not for anyone else, that whenever I thumped the microphone, often you're introduced, "We'd like to introduce the president at Emory University, Jim Wagner," but often it’s an evening and there’s milling around, and you go "Thump, thump, thump, thump. Ladies and gentlemen, would you please take your seats? Our program's about to begin. My name is Jim Wagner. It's my pleasure to be serving as Emory’s president." |
|  | That actually was the secret, that what you just heard. Over 13 years I tried never to say, "I am the president of Emory University." I tried to say, "I serve as the president. It's my privilege to be serving the role. That’s my job." It was for me, it was for nobody else. I haven’t, it's only been months that I’ve revealed this broadly after announcing my retirement, but it was a personal discipline to make sure that I didn’t become the job, that my identity wasn’t the job. |
|  | I’d seen people retire and because they had lost the position felt they lost their identity and who they were. President is what I do. I do it hard, by the way. I do it really as best I know how. There’s no less effort that I pour into presidency because it’s what I do instead of who I am, but I think it was important for me for a measure of sanity, in fact, to keep those things separate. It also would have allowed me to take any number of those branches that you asked about and still be Jim Wagner. |
|  | I think I could've been happy being ... My first job offer was with Hewlett-Packard Company. They had a bio instrument, bio medical device organization in Waltham, Massachusetts. I chose instead to go to the federal government, but if I had taken the other route, I think I'd be happy. If I hadn’t, if I'd been that professor with the patches, I could still be Jim Wagner. I'd still be happy and what a privilege it’s been. As I said, if I had worked doggedly only to be one thing or the other and throwing everything else out, I could have, I would not have enjoyed the marvelous opportunities and had the marvelous opportunities presented by having been a little more open and recognizing the distinction between doing and being. |
|  | I have a student office hour every week. It's not the same hours. When I’m in town, my assistant finds an hour slot and I split it up into three 20 minute slots. Once a year, at least, a young person, a senior maybe, will come in and say, "President Wagner, I’m really interested in University administration. I've been watching you. I've been reading the papers. I read the Chronicle of Higher Education. How do I become a University president? What were your steps?" |
|  | Well, almost sadly, my steps are very traditional, my path looks traditional. You start out as a professor, you go through the ranks, you become a department chair, you become a Provost, then you're recruited ... Excuse me, department chair and become a Dean. Then you become a Provost and then you become a president. That must be, I would bet 80% of the university presidents have those in their CV, in their resume, but I said, "You can’t do it my way. For example, I didn't go on for a PhD right away. I did nine years with the Food and Drug Administration. I stumbled into a lot of these things. I was not looking." |
|  | I told the students this and I've actually told colleagues this, I said, "If you’re interested in the next career step," I said, "May I suggest to you that you double down and work doubly hard to be the very best at what you are today and then be open when people tap you on the shoulder and say, 'Would you care to do this?' You may find it’s going to take you in a different direction. You may find it takes you in this line so yes, my lineage is straight, but each decision point was atypical. A failed Provost search that would call me be Provost, a president quitting that would cause me to be an interim president. |
|  | I’m glad you asked the question because there is a truism that I think I've come to believe also and it's those who work doggedly to achieve their goals run the risk of only achieving their goals and being closed off to the possibilities that might take them to grander goals." My goal, I want to be a great engineer when I was with Food and Drug Administration. When I was a professor, I had this picture of myself with a wool sweater and the leather patches on the arms and I thought, "I’m going to be a great professor. That’s what I want to do." |
|  | When I was department chair, it was just my turn and then I'd be an even better professor when I came back. When I was a Dean, that was the first time I looked at Debbie and I said, "This is going to take me away from teaching. It's going to take me away from research." We decided together that every time ... Once you're in these positions on the dark side, you get something called the "bully pulpit." When you clear your throat at a dinner or when you thump on a microphone, people stop and listen and it's only out of respect it seems to me, if nothing else, that you should think about what you're going to say. |
|  | It still takes me 20 minutes to come up with a 30 second toast because I don't want to insult people by that, so the answer is there were several inflection points, singularities as we might say in certain kinds of mathematical spaces, I happened to progress to those linearly, not by design but I happen to progress through those linearly. Oh, ethics. We haven't talked about ethics. |
|  | I need to because that's one of the things we exercised to great measure at Emory. I'd like to feel we exercised it earlier. I learned a definition that I liked from my engineering days. The definition said that ethical practice ... By the way, most folks if you ask for definition and shove the microphone in their face, they sort of stumble, "I know what it is when I see it." We've heard that about other issues, I guess. It’s about right and wrong. |
|  | The definition I've really enjoyed is a definition that says that ethical practice is making decisions, which leaders do all the time, based on moral principle which is making decisions. We're used to making decisions on principles all the time. I use the illustration of asking someone to go into a clothing store and purchase a jacket and bring your economic principle with you. They'll find two jackets, both would work equally well. One is less expensive than the other. My economic principle says, "Buy the cheap jacket," but I say, "Okay, rewind." |
|  | I want you to bring next time, I want to repeat this test, I want you to bring your financial principle and I want you to bring your social principles, that is social status principles. You go in the store, encounter the same two jackets. One jacket's cheaper than the other but the other jacket has a desirable designer label. Socially valued, has social value. "So okay, I’ll pay more for that," says the purchaser. Rewind, tell them to go back in the store a third time and now I want you to bring moral principle in addition to economic and social status principles. They'll go in and say, based on financial principle, it's jacket number one and based on social principles, it's jacket number two but then I’ve learned that jacket number two is made in an overseas sweatshop. My moral principle gets wrapped up in this as well. Ethics is making decision based on moral principle. |
|  | I've learned that it’s important to try to articulate those principles. All the way back in my Johns Hopkins days, I encountered a cheating issue with a student. It was one of the very few, it was a freshman kind of seminar of some sort that I taught but it was agreed upon that we would take attendance. The only time I'd ever take attendance and you'd pass a sheet around and people would sign in. It came to my attention actually, that there were two close friends. They would sort of alternate. One would sign in for the other. |
|  | The rules we had at Johns Hopkins is if you would confess that you had cheated that you would suffer the penalty of the professor, maybe that was an F on an exam or whatever it was, but then that would go into a separate file that would be destroyed upon your graduation unless you had a second infraction. If on the other hand you decided to go in front of a jury of your peers, the very first offense would have consequence for your record. |
|  | I bought these two students in and they confessed. I've forgotten what I did. It was a grade adjustment of some sort, but I was visited a few days later by one of the two and he was furious. He said, "Professor Wagner, you don’t understand." He said, "I am from China, as is my friend. My parents sent me here to get a medical degree and to get into a good medical school, I need good grades and what I was doing was pursuing good grades." I mentioned to him that most Americans anyway would like to be treated by a physician who actually had done the coursework rather than one who had somebody else sign in for him and I think you would like to be treated that way either, but it occurred to me, it just hit him, blank face. |
|  | It occurred to me that this was cultural. In fact, I learned later that there was ... In other words, his moral principle, he was within his set of moral principles. He was doing what he thought was right, obeying his elders, and he knew it wasn’t right institutionally, but there’s a higher order for him. You learn that in certain Asian cultures, you honor your elders by quoting them. It’s just understood that a young person isn't, perhaps it's understood a young person isn’t going to be a creative contributor, so if you have a creative idea it must’ve come from your elders and so there's a lot of quoting that goes on without any attribution at all. |
|  | Well, that’s honorable in some cultures. In this culture we call it plagiarism and it's not honorable. There are other cultures in other parts the world where our business school really needs to be teaching economics that include the value of bribery because you're just not going to get business done in some cultures if you’re not ready to bribe and understand how bribing works. It's perfectly legitimate within the moral code of honor in those economics circumstances and those cultures but not here. |
|  | I mentioned this by the way. I have an opportunity to address international students and I mentioned that when you’re here, there are certain things to watch out for, that I think would be arrogant to say that our moral principle are higher or better, but they certainly are different and here is how they’re different. Being clear about what we consider to be right and wrong, in order that we can practice ethically was a big leadership lesson from Emory. |
|  | It came into play in what I think was actually one of the darkest times in the 13 years and that was the economic downturn. Emory laid off scores of people. We closed in the medical side something on the order of 250 positions. On the non-medical side, I remember a number of 284, almost 300 positions. Combined, 550 positions and they were in offices that we knew we weren't going to pursue. There had been building cranes on Emory’s campus for all but a couple of years. People used to joke, "We're the Emory Eagles. Maybe we should be the Cranes." |
|  | The two years that they were off with two years following the initial part of the great recession, obviously we kept building through the great recession because we had budgeted for that ahead of time, but then things stopped so they had a whole office of planning, facilities planning that was just going to be idle and we largely decimated that sadly. I brought in the director of our ethics center, Paul [inaudible 01:31:10], and he's an international guy. I said, "Paul, is there any literature on the ethics of layoffs?" He produced it and we studied it in the cabinet. |
|  | Since you're allowing me to ramble, I'll tell you what some of the surprising and counter-intuitive things are in the ethics of layoffs from those who've actually studied it, and they are to lay off people in order to stay afloat, is marginally ethical and perhaps unethical, but to lay off people in order that an organization can succeed or even thrive, that’s ethical. If you and I are part of a team of a dozen and we know that if we lay off one person we can balance the budget, but if we lay off two people, we can actually advance our programs. We should lay off two people. |
|  | From the perspective, say these writings, from the perspective of those who are dismissed, first of all you have to treat them very well and we did as a matter of fact. We gave everyone six months of healthcare. We gave those that were close to retirement, we said, "Let's call it good." People said, "How could you afford that?" We laid off more people but when they left, they felt as though they were contributing somehow. Yeah, they were angry and they were hurt, but maybe some of them thought also they were not just victims, but maybe even martyrs helping the institution to be better. |
|  | If the institution hadn’t gotten better, if it couldn't have improved and it was no different and people were just scraping to get by having laid off the bare minimum, that would’ve been unethical. We had, as I recall of all those layoffs ... Now, those were positions closed, not all of them are full, so I don’t know the actual number. I don’t have in my head the actual number of people but of all of those I believe we had only one that I’m aware of that decided that it wasn’t just and that we should, that their particular layoff should be reviewed in the courts. That’s a pretty tiny number. |
|  | Those that were left on the organization saw how we were treating those that left. We were treating them with respect, we were treating them with support and I hope they felt that we were doing things we didn’t want to do but felt we had to do and were doing them in a humane way. I think that was Emory's darkest time. We didn’t get as much press. We didn't get the kind of press that I got at the three-fifths compromise or the press that we got over the recent political chalkings on our campus. We don't need to go there unless you'd like to follow up, but I think I'll probably wrap there. |
|  | It's been 13 years. The leadership style is one, my leadership style is one that’s toward that consensus-building inspiration side of the spectrum as opposed to the authoritarian side of the spectrum. I tried to understand people and what motivates them. I tried to hire people smarter than I am in every one of those areas. I tried to delegate and not task. Tasking means, "I want you to go do this, this and this." |
|  | Delegate says, "Let’s agree that this is the goal. I don't care if you make left turns or right turns, go up, you go down, get to that goal and however you do it works for me," and when you hire good people you can do that. Maybe that’s partly how you last more than the average, longer than the average time, but it was never my ... In fact, it was my intention I thought I'd probably go 15 years, but I think this is good. It’s good for Emory. I’m excited for me and I’m learning about what leadership means in the retirement context. I really do think the rate at which the lessons have come has gotten faster through my career and the need to learn more is still there. Thank you. |