



NCIA annually bestows the Instructional Leadership Award to active instructional administrators who exemplify academic leadership through their creativity and innovation; their sustained commitment to instructional issues and challenges; and their substantial impact on college organizations. In April 2009, NCIA recognized six community college administrators with Instructional Leadership Awards. These individuals will be highlighted in a series of abstracts that focus on their leadership philosophies and insights.

Barry Russell is the Vice President of Instruction at the College of the Siskiyous in Weed, California. He was the recipient of the Instructional Leadership Award for Region 9. Dr. Russell attributes a considerable amount of his leadership success to his innate desire to work together with others colleagues in collaborative decision making efforts as well as reaching out to meet other leaders in his field, learning from their experiences. In supporting his application, Barry's nominator's emphasized his efforts to improve instruction and instructional administration at both the state and regional levels. In this abstract he reflects on the leadership experiences of his career.

Reflections on Leading

Barry A. Russell, Ph.D.

Background

The call to become a community college leader came early in my career as I decided to move from a teaching career into one of administration. I have always looked for ways to streamline and organize things...and doing so with educational institutions came naturally and with purpose. In my early years of leadership, I worked with local community groups, service clubs, and teacher groups and quickly learned that if you were organized, you tended to become president of the group. On the one hand, this push to leadership seemed overwhelming but on the other hand, it happened as a natural part of my career.

As I became more comfortable in leadership positions, I learned that I enjoyed working with people to solve problems. I pursued by Ph.D. in the University of Texas Community College Leadership Program. This program helped me to refine my talents and learn about the history and organizational culture of community colleges. I then moved into my serious work as a statewide leader as my first job out of my Ph.D. program was as the Director of the Central Texas Tech Prep Consortium. This was at the very beginning of the Tech Prep era and I immediately saw that we needed to move together as a state if we were going to have a big impact. With the great support of a large number of Tech Prep Directors, I organized the Tech Prep Directors Association. This group met on a regular basis to deal with the initial issue of the new legislation as well as to share best practices along the way.

As I moved further along in my career as an administrator, I moved to dean positions and then finally to my current

position of Vice President of Instruction at College of the Siskiyous. Throughout all of these positions, I saw that leaders who were well connected to others in their field tended to be very successful. Yes, there are those career administrators who never leave the campus and do not get involved in major initiatives...but I always felt that there was more. I looked for ways to meet the other deans around me and get to know what they were doing and what I might learn from their experiences. I was drawn to leadership of the California Association of Instructional Administrators (AIA) where I served two terms as president. From those connections, I found many contacts throughout the state and the country that have helped me move my college forward.

Following my tenure with AIA, I moved to the Vice President position at College of the Siskiyous where I began serving as the regional representative for the California Community College Chief Instructional Officers Association. Participation in this group has allowed me to become more involved in statewide issues and discussions. I have served on two committees that are dealing with the California educational technology infrastructure and establishing the strategic goals for the state. Through this group, I have also been able to develop friendships, mentor others, and build networks that have assisted me in doing my own work back on my campus.

I continue to be involved with statewide, regional, and local issues and provide leadership whenever there is the need. I am currently working on a strategic goal for College of the Siskiyous to establish clinical relationships with the hospitals in Oregon...just across the board. The

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policy, political, and legal barriers are considerable but we are slowly making progress and should achieve our goal within the next year.

Over the last two years, I have been working on community leadership as well. Serving in a small rural population has given me the opportunity to work with local residents to solve problems and establish planning priorities. Part of this work has been done through a wonderful regional community leader training program from the Ford Family Foundation in Roseburg, OR. The goal of this organization is to provide strong leadership development in the rural areas of Oregon and two counties in northern California. I continue to learn much about being a part of the non-community college community.

This background information should provide the reader with an understanding of the broad areas of leadership required by a community college leader. I have found the work to be fulfilling and rewarding and look forward to many more years of service.

How do you provide leadership?

Providing leadership, for me, is a matter of being in the right spot to take on a task that needs to get done and using communication skills, knowledge of the subject, and initiative to accomplish my goals. Of course, the basic element for any leader is to have those to lead. In addition, the leadership style depends on if you have had the luxury of selecting your group, if you inherited your group, or if you are dealing with a completely unorganized group.

I have been very fortunate over the years to have groups of very fine and motivated people with which to work. Whether it has been a campus-based group or a statewide organization, the fact that is, I have been very lucky. One perspective that has helped keep me in this lucky state is that I always work on projects and with groups that will provide some great benefit to the school or organization. I do not select activities that are solely for my own ego or my own benefit.

A good example of this attitude is my involvement with a statewide activity related to the California Board of Registered Nursing. I have been working with the California Hospital Association to change a major barrier to the establishment of clinical locations outside of the state of California. This activity could not be further away from my own discipline interests or past work experiences...but it is a challenge, it is interesting, and it will ultimately benefit my college and others.

I also have considered it a great honor to be appointed

to several statewide committees working on educational technology. These committees have provided me a way to learn from others about the educational technology needs as well as bringing those innovations back home to my campus in the way of professional development or future curriculum/program development.

Attributes and challenges of leadership

The attributes of leadership are many and have been studied, chronicled, and dissected by many researchers over the years. One thing that I have learned over my many years of community college leadership is that when I am going things correctly, it just feels right. Now, I know this is akin to "I'll know it when I see it" but it is really true that leadership just fits a person when it is done correctly.

When major problems occur or when my leadership has come upon problems it is usually because I have not followed my heart and my own sense of what is right. Listening to the inner voice is a great way to keep you on the right pathway.

Keep a positive spirit is essential. It is so easy to get drawn into conflict and negative thinking...especially when you have invested so much of your own time and energy into a project or process. Current philosopher, Eckhart Toller says,

*"Negativity is never the optimum way of dealing with any situation. In fact, in most cases it keeps you stuck in it, blocking real change. Anything that is done with negative energy will become contaminated by it and in time give rise to more pain, more unhappiness."*¹

I find that separating my own wants and needs from what is actually the goal in mind; I can usually do away with the negative and move the project forward. In some ways, I think that leadership will sometimes bring you to a completely different spot than you intended to go...but that is a good thing in a shared vision environment. The collective intelligence and strengths of a group are always stronger than the leadership of one. By focusing on the core values and mission of the institution and forgetting personal preferences and biases, the leader can better accomplish goals and activities.

As I continue to work on regional and statewide issues, I find it even more important to focus on the positive and the collective input from the whole group. I may start an idea or foster a creative solution. But once it takes wing and begins to develop, I pull back and allow others to chart the direction and the end result.

Communication is one of the keys to strong leadership. When I have had problems, it is usually related to communication issues and not to actual decisions

¹Toller, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. New World Library, Novato, CA. 1999.

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being made and process being used. People like to be informed...some more than others...but informed just the same. As I have moved higher and higher in my levels of authority, this issue becomes more and more relevant.

Listening is a major portion of the communication issue. Early in my career, I happened to take a class on counseling. In the class, we studied the various great counseling gurus – Carl Rogers and the like. This experience has helped me become a better listener and gatherer of information, instead of insisting that I have the answers and the innovations. People tend to have the answers to their own problems and by helping them sort through the obvious and analyze their situations, they become more self-reliant and strong in their own leadership abilities.

Of course, if you are listening, you cannot be talking. Another big lesson I have learned along the way is that less really is more and keeping one's mouth shut and listening can be a great advantage. This may also be a direct connection to my personal learning style preference, but I think is an essential attribute of a leader. Once again, others like to be involved and treated with respect. Listening to others and not talking yourself shows them that you do want their opinion and you do want to learn more from them.

Honesty is also a major attribute of any leader who wishes to gain the support of those around. I try very hard to be honest with others as well as honest with myself. Closely related to this focus on honesty is the ability to always tell the truth. From my perspective, combined, these two items – honesty and truthfulness – tend to be the basis of many a good leader. I have often seen people caught in a battle on their campus because of the inability to provide a truthful situation, thereby breeding an atmosphere of distrust. Without the support of those around, the ability to promote change is taken away from the leader.

To have all the many attributes and still accomplish ones goals takes a great deal of organization. I know that my

most frustrating times have been when my organizational abilities have been challenged. This is quite easy to do because of the heavy workload and the sometimes diverse types of issues requiring the attention of the leader. But, I am more at ease and demonstrate a calmer sense of leadership when I am organized.

Overall, the attributes of a leader are many. Most importantly, the attributes must be focused on positive affects and not on negative actions. Looking for the good in everyone is a key element that will guide a leader into applying these attributes to many situations through their career.

Final observations

Finally, I will be forever grateful for the mentoring and learning that took place in early phases of my leadership career. College presidents, vice presidents, faculty, and community college researchers have all been that at the beginning of my career and provided me great insights.... both negative and positive.

Sometimes, the best way to learn how to do something is to rule out the things that don't work. Although, I would not recommend that most people use this "process of elimination" technique to guide their everyday leadership activities, it does provide a good retrospective approach to solve some leadership problems.

As I look toward the future of my leadership days, I take a great deal of pride in what I have accomplished in the past. I also have a great deal of hope for the future. All of the trials and tribulations of the community college leader are not enough to erase the positive energy created when working with others to achieve goals. I consider it a great honor and pleasure to work in the community college system....and look forward to many more years or service.

Brent Cejda, Editor (ISSN 1551-7756) **September 2009, Volume 7, Issue 4**

E-mail: bcejda2@unl.edu

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