

**2014 Student Leadership Conference  
January 11, 2014  
Chan Centre for the Performing Arts  
9:05 am**

Thank you Holly (Dysserinck) and Erica (Baker).

Good morning.

I am honoured and delighted to be here once again to help open this student leadership conference.

It really is wonderful to see so much energy gathered together, and on a Saturday morning in January no less. Clearly, born leaders, all of you!

No doubt many of you have heard an individual described as someone “who leads by example.” While I understand the inference, I am not convinced that the phrase “leading by example” is necessarily a positive endorsement. How do we know that the example is a good one, or a bad one?

Leading by principled example is something altogether different, and an appropriate topic in the context of the theme of this year's conference – *Be infinite*. Exemplifying ethical principles in leadership, or in any other activity for that matter, will never go out of favour.

Sometimes living and leading by principled example is easy. A UBC alumnus recently explained to me how he discovered the ease of daily hygiene when travelling in countries where water supply is limited. In particular, he noted that he could thoroughly wash his hands with only a faint trickle of water. It only required a few more seconds of time to scrub and rinse off the soap.

He also found - both in his travels and after returning home - that using smaller amounts of shampoo achieved completely satisfactory results, and eliminated the daily excess of detergents and grey water that he had been responsible for sending to municipal treatment facilities.

Having become sensitized to the ease of more principled daily living, he looked for other ways to reduce consumption. One of the most effective

was eliminating a driving habit of hard acceleration from a stationary position, followed by equally hard braking mere seconds later at the next intersection. It was easy to see that it made no sense to burn excess fuel with no apparent improvement in travel time.

But then an unsettling thing happened. Close friends and family members began to poke good-natured fun at him for his new habits and routines, suggesting he was perhaps becoming a bit eccentric.

“It was strange,” he said “to feel alone in doing the right thing.”

But in persevering and advocating for others to assume similar habits, one could argue that his was a simple, but superb care of leading by principled example. You can imagine how pleasantly surprised he was when some of those same people eventually confessed that they too had altered certain habits and routines.

If only it was always that easy to affect change...

Leaders invariably encounter resistance, often severe, in their efforts to achieve principled long-term outcomes, and to invoke changes required to do so.

The challenge is particularly precarious in the political arena. The citizens of five large emerging-market nations – South Africa, Brazil, India, Indonesia and Turkey - will go to the polls to elect new leaders in 2014. The successful candidates will face a world in the throes of change as the US Federal Reserve winds down monetary stimulus programs that have injected billions into the global economy, much of which has found its way to large emerging-market countries in need of foreign investment.

Economists and institutional investors have cautioned that some of these emerging-market countries urgently need to invoke unpopular reforms in order to sustain their new-found prosperity over the longer term. But an age-old dilemma prevails; the need to appeal to voters in the short-term means that governments seeking re-election will need to hold back on

reforms – reforms that have already resulted in public anger in Brazil and Turkey.

Meanwhile, here in North America, public administrators who are beholden to officials elected largely on well-received promises of lower taxes are often forced to reduce services and capital investments at a time when public needs are on the rise and infrastructure is deteriorating.

Many corporate leaders face a similar dilemma: appeal to shareholders in the short-term by cutting costs and increasing dividends? Or take the more principled but less popular tack of re-investing profits to ensure long-term growth and sustainability?

I wish I had comprehensive answers for leaders who face such complex challenges. But what I can suggest to you here today is this: Never lose sight of the principles required to guide the ethical changes that underpin the long-term success and sustainability of whatever organization it is that you help to lead. Don't get caught in short-termism.

And when opposition to ethical change confronts you, accept willingly the ultimate test of your leadership skills - the test of truth and knowledge - or more specifically, the test of successfully imparting truth and knowledge to earn wider acceptance of change.

As one who leads by principled example, you will be required to draw upon all of your skills as thinkers and communicators to bring truth, knowledge, facts and data to bear in situations where change is essential.

Such an undertaking is not without risks, particularly to those seeking election, but how else are we to reverse the often misguided – and occasionally destructive - pursuit of short-term interests?

As leaders and change agents, it will be increasingly incumbent upon you to elevate the debate, to passionately engage key influencers, and to maintain the energy required to instil informed decision-making among

people whose alignment and support are essential to stable long-term futures.

In short, you will need to be both noble and bold. So let's get started.

On the very first break in today's program, go to a washroom and endeavour to thoroughly wash your hands using the minimum amount of soap and water required.

At the risk of pushing the analogy too far, I submit to you that a sea change begins with the first few drops of knowledge and truth, but only if many hands work together.

Let this daily exercise serve as a tool to keep the imperative of living and leading by principled example absolutely top of mind for the entirety of your journey.

Indeed, for infinity.

(Pause)

I want to congratulate all of you on your decision to participate in this conference, and my sincere thanks to the organizers and presenters.

Have a fabulous day!