

UBC Alma Mater Society All Presidents' Dinner

January 31, 2013

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Good evening. I am delighted and honoured to be here tonight. It is always an energizing experience to be among UBC's student leaders.

In anticipation of this year's All Presidents' Dinner, I gave some thought to what exactly it is that motivates certain students to take on the added – and often onerous - responsibilities of leading a campus organization.

No doubt the reasons are varied. I suspect that some of you have clear aspirations to serve as leaders in business or public service or in professional life. Others may have specific objectives in mind, perhaps to affect change in an area of keen interest. Still others might simply believe that extracurricular activity of this nature will eventually pay off in some yet-to-be-determined way.

In any case, Bravo.

For others, there is perhaps no direct link between your leadership activities today and your future plans, or at least not one that you have presently identified. But in the meantime you enjoy the intellectual challenge and the interactivity with other students. Or maybe you've simply discovered that you have inherent leadership capabilities. Or maybe an opportunity arose that happened to provide some perks – perhaps an office here in the SUB for you to use as a base of operations to be envied by your friends.

If you fall into one of these camps, I still say, Bravo. Your leadership burden is no less noble, for you are bound to learn a great deal and you can still provide a valuable service to fellow students. But I'll come back to this group in a moment.

Irrespective of the reason you have chosen to lead, your timing is impeccable. We are entering an era in which leadership opportunities will abound for your generation.

You've all seen the headlines about the predicted arrival of an acute skilled-labour shortage as the baby boomers retire. I'm a late baby boomer, so I have a way to go yet! Not surprisingly, the same demographic shift will result in the imminent retirement of a great number of senior leaders in both public and private sectors. Indeed, leadership succession has been a hot topic for some time now in many parts of the world, Japan, Europe and North America in particular.

But developing the right leadership skills for the 21st century won't be as easy as attending a trade school.

Let's face it. Leading people has never been easy and it's getting more difficult all the time as organizations grow larger, more complex, and potentially more disconnected than ever before.

Perhaps you've heard the story of a man flying in a hot air balloon who realizes he is lost. He reduces altitude and spots a man down below. He lowers the balloon a little further and shouts, "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

The man below says, “Yes, you are in a hot air balloon hovering about 10 metres above this field.” “You must work in information technology,” says the balloonist. “I do,” replies the man, “How did you know?”

“Well,” says the balloonist, “everything you have told me is technically correct, but it is of no use to me.”

The man below says, “You must work in management.” “I do,” replies the balloonist, “but how did you know?”

“Well, says the man, “you don’t know where you are or where you are going, but you expect me to be able to help you. You are in the same position you were before we met, but now it’s my fault.”

Among other things, this anecdote lampoons the kind of dis-connect that can occur within large organizations. But it also underscores the importance for leaders to have a strategic destination clearly in mind, and a means of sharing that destination with all members of the group he or she is leading. Conventional wisdom tells us that people who understand an organization’s strategy can more readily identify how they can contribute, particularly if they also have a means of monitoring progress and challenges on the specific objectives they are pursuing.

But as important as these leadership principles are, effective modern leaders need to bring additional capabilities to bear.

Business school professors all seem to agree that leadership is now about much more than sharing objectives and motivating others; it’s also

about working across cultural boundaries and facilitating change. Simply stated, it's about adaptability to new and changing circumstances.

Perhaps you have heard the term, "learning agility." I'm not certain who coined the term, but it simply means the ability to adapt to shifting demands, or to take lessons from the past and fit them into new and different situations.

Learning agility, as an imperative for modern leadership, cannot be understated. Security, stability and predictability are no longer the norm. Today, it is far more common for organizations - public, professional and private – to have culturally diverse employee populations and clients, and to operate in a constant state of change.

New demands, new products, new services, new communication tools, mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, upsizing, shifting technologies – the causes are endless. One naturally concludes that a certain amount of learning agility is essential for all of us, but at no time before has the ability to adapt to changing circumstances been more essential for leaders than it is today.

With that in mind, it strikes me that the activities you have undertaken as leaders of UBC student organizations are of added significance, particularly for those of you with long-term leadership aspirations. Simply put, you need to learn all that you can, as soon as you can. Above all, it is essential that you strive to be agile learners so that you can meet the

adaptability imperatives of leadership in the 21st century, and thereby prepare yourselves for the many opportunities that lay ahead.

But it isn't just opportunities that abound within the leadership communities of the future. There is also need, specifically - human need.

In many parts of the world, we see what many regard as leadership crises, from European central bankers, to a deadlocked US Government, to some of our provincial and federal political parties – all centred around good and well intentioned people who don't always agree on major issues. As a safeguard to human interests, it is only prudent for us to assume that the need for learning-agile leaders – highly adaptive free thinkers who can see new solutions to complex problems – grows more acute within the public arena.

And what may be compounding the challenges in the public arena is reluctance on the part of too many of the most capable learning-agile leaders to enter. One underlying cause that has been suggested is that the proliferation of social media has led to public leaders being exposed to more scrutiny and criticism than ever before, and with a much lighter burden of proof than that demanded of conventional journalism. Indeed, haven't we all asked ourselves the question: "What capable person would want to suffer the slings and arrows of public leadership?"

The answer is...somebody.

If healthy civil societies are to be protected in the regions where they exist, and advanced in regions where do not, somebody has to step

forward. Somebody has to step forward in every jurisdiction, every sector, and for every just cause - for the very simple reason that every part of the world needs every good and ethical leader it can get. And so getting back to those of you who don't see an immediate connection between what you are doing today and what you hope to be doing tomorrow, I respectfully urge you to think again. Think about both the abundant opportunities and the critical needs within modern societies.

And while you're at it, think about who, what and where you are today – bright, engaged and committed students at one of the world's top universities; agile learners who have been willingly drawn into the service of others, and who are already making great contributions to your university and to fellow students.

And so the question I hope you'll all consider is this: Who among your generation is best suited to respond to the opportunities and needs within your future leadership communities?

As I see it, the answer takes the form of another question.
Who better than you?

Good luck, and thank you.