I AM BECAUSE WE ARE

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase, "I am because we are" comes from the African philosophy known as Ubuntu.[1] "According to Ubuntu, *there exists a common bond between us all and it is through this bond, through our interaction with our fellow human beings, that we discover our own human qualities.*"[2] This can be interpreted as suggesting that a leader is only a leader because of the people or followers she or he serves. I believe it is on this premise that leadership, at its very core, begins. The human qualities of people—whether in higher education, business, or government—often define the leadership capabilities of those people and potentially determine if they will eventually ascend to positions of authority within society. Significantly greater credibility is lended to this leadership style when one considers who among the world's former and current leaders have embraced the Ubuntu philosophy. People like Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former president John F. Kennedy, and many others have incorporated this philosophy into their governance dispositions.

After a considerable number of years working in higher education administration, I have learned that in order to be an effective leader, one must be willing to change with the times and tones of the community for which you lead. If one lives by the Ubuntu philosophy, then one embodies change as a basis for

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    1. *Ubuntu (philosophy)*, WIKIPEDIA (Dec. 14, 2015), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_(philosophy) (last updated Apr. 28, 2016).
    2. *What is Ubuntu?*, WHEELOCK COLLEGE, http://www.wheelock.edu/about/programs-and-initiatives/the-arts/ubuntu-arts/about-ubuntu (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

becoming what might be referred to as a "kinder, gentler" leader. This doesn't mean that one all of a sudden becomes soft in one's decision-making, but more so that one perhaps dedicates more time and thought to decisions before they render them. Ubuntu encourages the leader to look more toward reconciliation than to retribution. It provides clarity and focus to one not only as a leader, but as an equal member of one's community.

Whether or not one sees oneself as the kind of leader who falls within the Ubuntu philosophy—as an autocrat determined to be all to all—or somewhere in between, one will be undertaking one of the most demanding, yet important, challenges of one's lifetime. Leaders—more often than not—do not see themselves as leaders, but simply professionals whose turn it is to manage the day to day operation of their unit. Undergirding all of this is the overarching need and expectation from one's colleagues, to not only manage, but to manage well. If, in fact, one is judged to have managed well, one will be viewed as a leader and not simply a placeholder. Leadership is an awesome responsibility, and not one to be taken lightly. If one is called to be a leader, consider it an honor and not a cross to bear. If one sees oneself in the latter category, get out quick.

While I do not presume to know all there is to know about being an effective leader, there are several key concepts, constructs, or beliefs that have guided me during my tenure as a department head, center director, associate dean, and now, as a dean. In the following narrative, one will learn of what I refer to as "the dimensions of leadership," or at least those that have guided me along my journey. While my predominant doctrine falls within Ubuntu philosophy, these other key components remain central to the leadership model that I follow.

I. THE DIMENSIONS OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership is framed by many lenses. Whether one chooses to be guided by Ubuntu or other more obvious and conventional styles of leadership, she or he must be successful in creating a followership that works toward the goals established by the leader. How does one who is held up as a leader of people—whether they work in a corporation, government, or higher education institution—enlist commitment, dedication, and loyalty of those people? Good question, you might say! It is not as complicated as it is simplistic, and it is not as simplistic as it is complicated. In other words, "it ain't easy!" When I think back on my own path toward becoming a dean at a Research I institution, I scratch my head and wonder how this even happened. I often refer to myself as the "accidental dean." Becoming a leader is by no means the product of an accident, but leadership, at least at my current level, was never part of the plan.

So how does one become a leader? First, one must be dedicated and committed to one's work at whatever level one is currently placed. We are always sending messages by way of what we say and what we do not say, by way of how we communicate—verbally and nonverbally—and by how we dress. Yes, clothes do make the man (and woman), as they say. But there is a majority of leaders who never thought of themselves as leaders. This is perhaps the sentiment that resulted in becoming a leader at some point along their career path. It is the colleague whose behavior is always consistent and focused on contributing to the success of the unit. It is this person who others go to for advice, guidance, and support when they find themselves struggling to find a solution to a particular work or personal challenge. And it is this person who, when taking the opportunity to voice an opinion or make a declarative statement, unintentionally silences the room so that all in attendance are sure to hear every word this person speaks. It then may be after years of this sort of noticed behavior that, all of sudden, you find yourself being nominated or recommended for a leadership position.

As I have become more entrenched in leadership and reflect back on how I got here, it makes me even more committed to continual learning about how I can become a better leader. I have learned much from my experience, my interaction with colleagues and students, and by acutely observing other leaders I have been fortunate enough to meet and to know. It is from this base that I have identified several dimensions of leadership that have influenced me the most over the past several years or so. They include emotional intelligence, wisdom, mindfulness, vulnerability, and attention to the importance of diversity. So let us further explore each of these concepts in greater depth and investigate their relationship to becoming a successful leader.

II. Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman defines emotional intelligence as the ability "to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; [and] to empathize and to hope."[3] When I am asked by my students, colleagues, and others expressing interest in what I believe to be the most important attribute of a leader, I immediately respond with one simple phrase: emotional intelligence. The oft-used follow-up question is: "How does one acquire emotional intelligence?" My response is one that is very

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3. Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence 34 (1995).

personal and relates to my experience as a physical education teacher. For me, any emotional intelligence that I am deemed to have was imparted to me through the experiences I had in working with children with disabilities. My early experiences resulted from my position as an elementary physical education teacher and later as a professor of adapted physical education at Florida State University.

While I give significant credit to my developing some modicum of emotional intelligence to the opportunities I have enjoyed through teaching children with disabilities, the manifestation of this essential attribute continues to be enriched as one gains more and more experience in associating and working with a diverse group of people. Certainly having the opportunity to become a leader helps to chart this course. But as one ascends into the role of "leader," the dynamics associated with emotional intelligence become a bit more complex. John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey define emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth."[4] Whew! I have to take a very deep breath before digesting all of this. When one breaks this statement down into its component parts, those who have been so fortunate as to occupy positions of leadership for a significant length of time are better able to comprehend its meaning.

All one has to do to "perceive" one's emotions is to sit with a disgruntled faculty member whose department head has not treated him or her fairly or to council an administrative colleague who has lost control of the proverbial ship and is in need of guidance as to how to right the ship and get it back on course. I don't know that any leader truly has the ability to regulate others' emotions, but clearly there are times when one can either intentionally or unintentionally evoke certain emotions from someone with whom they are speaking, depending on what is said or what is not said. This is all to say that leaders sometimes have power and authority to regulate emotions, or even render them irregular, under the right set of circumstances. Through my years of experience as a leader, I have learned that when used appropriately, emotional intelligence can be a wonderful ally in helping to calm tempestuous situations and prevent such situations from even occurring in the first place.

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4.   John D. Mayer & Peter Salovey, *What is Emotional Intelligence?*, *in* EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS 5 (Peter Salovey & David J. Sluyter eds., 1997).

Further to the credit of high levels of emotional intelligence, Allen, Shankman, and Miguel have advanced this construct into what they refer to as "emotionally intelligent leadership."[5] In this way, leaders model certain behaviors thought to elicit support from their colleagues or, in other words, lead by example. Emotionally intelligent leaders aim to inspire and promote a shared vision across the unit for which they lead and by doing so empower their followers to work more intently on achieving the collective mission of that unit.

III. WISDOM

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines wisdom as "accumulated philosophic or scientific learning," or what is more commonly referred to as knowledge; the "ability to discern inner qualities and relationships," also known as insight; and "good sense or judgment."[6] When asked to reveal my own personal definition of wisdom, I respond by saying that it is an accumulation of learned experience, guided by the requisite amount of cognitive and emotional intelligence and sweetened by a very good dose of common sense. If one aspires to a position of leadership, she or he will almost certainly need to adopt a disposition toward acquiring wisdom in whatever ways they can, or they will not remain in a leadership position for very long. I am sure we could identify some individuals in leadership who have held their positions for years and are viewed as unwise, however they would be few and far in between.

As we further ponder the importance of wisdom in the overall portrait of leadership in academia, I refer to the definition in Wikipedia, which states, "[w]isdom . . . is the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight."[7] Of particular interest to me is the incorporation of "understanding" into this definition.[8] When I reflect back on my now fifteen years as an academic dean and more than thirty-five years in higher education, this is the construct I find most difficult to pin down. How does one come to an "understanding" of things? Is this strictly an intellectual process or do emotions come into play? To me,

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5. *See* Scott J. Allen, Marcy Levy Shankman & Rosanna F. Miguel, *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: An Integrative, Process-Oriented Theory of Student Leadership*, 11 J. LEADERSHIP EDUC. 177, 177–91 (2012).

6. *Wisdom Definition*, MERRIAM-WEBSTER, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wisdom (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

7. *Wisdom*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

8. *Id.*

it involves the incorporation of many personal attributes that a successful leader must have. These might include, but are not limited to, the ability to listen and communicate effectively, the ability to remain in control of one's emotions, the ability to be contemplative and thoughtful, and the ability to practice the act of rehearsal, both before and after important conversations. Obviously, there are many moving parts engaged in the process of understanding, which will only manifest in sound judgment and reasoning after all has come into play.

I have known many people who I have found to possess a high level of intellect, but who turned out to be very poor leaders. The reason for this, in my humble opinion, is their apparent lack of wisdom. While they may have displayed one or two of the attributes contained within the Wikipedia definition cited above, they obviously lacked others, which in the scheme of things, may be most responsible for one becoming a skilled, respected, and yes, wise leader. All you need to do is look into the annals of The Chronicle of Higher Education[9] to find examples of leaders, once thought to be highly effective, who have all of a sudden derailed. The derailing of key educational leaders throughout the past—including chancellors, presidents, deans, and others—has not necessarily resulted from these individuals not being qualified to do their respective jobs. However, it seems to happen when they, all of sudden, become more important than the institution that they are supposed to be serving, and instead believe they should be served by their followers, and in as much, the institution itself. In my way of thinking, the derailment of these leaders occurs after they have lost an appreciation for what it was that led them to their positions in the first place, and perhaps also, serious lapses in judgment.

IV. MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a "state of active, open attention on the present."[10] When you are mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them as good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means "living in the moment and awakening to experience."[11] Now wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all be "mindful." Mindfulness is a construct that I have only recently become aware of, at least to the point

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9. *See generally* THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, http://www.chronicle .com (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

10. *Mindfulness*, PSYCHOL. TODAY, https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ mindfulness (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

11. *Id.*

where I have started the practice of actively applying it in my daily routine. The "leader,"—whether she or he is the CEO of a major corporation, the President of a Research I university, or the Dean of an academic college, such as myself—must be able to separate the corn from the cob. In other words, you need to be able to compartmentalize and decompartmentalize certain pieces of your job in order to maintain your sanity and your ability to function in a productive and healthful manner.

One of the many challenges academic leaders face on a day-to-day, month-to-month, and year-to-year basis is work/life balance. Being mindful of this challenge and striving to create and sustain normalcy outside of work should be a goal of every leader. If it is not, all too often you will read about the resignation, retirement, and even in some cases, the death of a leader who was not able to strike a balance between work as a leader and their other roles in life, such as spouse, partner, mother, father, or friend. Higher education leadership can be very rewarding and stressful at the very same time. It is essential that the leader be successful in building and retaining inner resources to lessen stress and open the mind to new and healthful opportunities. Simple walks around campus, meditation, planned exercise, a coffee or tea break with colleagues, a good book or movie, or whatever else may bring one peace are positive ways to maintain balance.

V. Vulnerability

I believe I speak for most, if not all, leaders of higher education, business, government, and other organizations in saying that the prevailing perception of a successful leader is one of strength, conviction, and fortitude. Few, if any, would agree that being "vulnerable" would become one of the leader's greatest assets. However, speaking from my own experience as an administrator of some twenty years in higher education, vulnerability has become one of my cornerstones for effective leadership. Vulnerability is defined as, "a concept that links the relationship that people have with their environment to social forces and institutions and the cultural values that sustain and contest them."[12] While almost all definitions of this term cast it in a negative light, leaders can use their own personal or emotional vulnerability to aid them in their decision making, especially when it affects the well-being of people they work with. Emotional vulnerability speaks to an open and transparent style of

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12. *Vulnerability*, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulnerability (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

leadership. It is one that helps to break down the walls that serve as barriers to true and productive communication. But how do individuals in positions of leadership reconcile the question of vulnerability in the day-to-day management of their responsibilities?

Perhaps the most widely known scholar addressing the concept of vulnerability in the work place is social researcher Dr. Brené Brown. She has single-handedly dismantled the perception that being vulnerable is a sign of weakness. Dr. Brown speaks of the power of vulnerability to connect us even more deeply to the people we work for and with. Brown asserts that "[c]onnection is why we're here[;] it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."[13] One of her most well-known quotes is: "*Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage*. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness."[14] Should we expect leaders to speak the truth and demonstrate courage in the performance of their appointed duties? Absolutely!

So when one connects the term "vulnerability" with the term "leadership," what do we get? I would posit that we get a leader who understands her or his own emotions and recognizes inherent weaknesses that, unless managed, may manifest in less than desirable outcomes. The vulnerable leader is not a weak leader, but one who understands the human connection to the job of being a leader. Leaders who comprehend that "[c]onnection is why we are here" will recognize more purpose and meaning in their lives and in the lives of those they serve.[15]

VI. THE ALTRUISTIC LEADER

Simply stated, "[a]ltruism or selflessness is the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others."[16] I can't imagine how any leader could be a successful leader without being altruistic. However, it is important to stress that altruism may be, at times, mistaken for an attempt by the leader to coerce colleagues or associates into doing something they would rather not. This is where sincerity of intent comes into play. If a leader is truly altruistic, it should not take very long for followers to understand that their best interests are first and foremost in the mind of the leader. However, a

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13. Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability*, Address at TEDx Houston (Jan. 2016) (transcript available at https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerabili ty?language=en).

14. BRENÉ BROWN, DARING GREATLY 37 (2012).

15. *Id.* at 237.

16. *Altruism*, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altruism (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

true leader cannot be a leader to everyone who falls under her or his authority. There are times when a leader will make decisions that will not be perceived as altruistic decisions at all. While I do everything within my authority and power to say "yes" to the many requests I receive from my colleagues, it ultimately becomes necessary to say "no" every once in a while. And those who you say "no" to typically do not enjoy taking "no" for an answer. At the end of the day, an altruistic leader will win over the support of most and perhaps lose the support of a few. I don't believe that there has ever been an effective and successful leader in our society who has at any point had one hundred percent support from her or his followers. As for myself, I am happy with a simple majority.

One cannot talk about the altruistic leader without also talking about the servant leader. Altruism and servant leadership go hand in hand. While servant leadership is a timeless concept, the phrase "servant leadership" was coined by Robert Greenleaf in "The Servant as Leader," an essay that he first published in 1970.[17] According to Greenleaf, "[t]he servant-leader *is* servant first," and servant leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve."[18] In some respects, all leaders are servant leaders and must possess an intrinsic desire to serve and support the needs of others, often referred to as followers. However, history has shown that this is certainly not always the case. For whatever reason, there have been leaders—especially within the field of higher education—who have demonstrated keen abilities to lead, based on prior positions and experience, but then have turned to the dark side. We only have to look at past leaders at the University of Tennessee to validate this hypothesis. Not one, but two different presidents took office, committed unforgivable and unimaginable acts of malfeasance, and then off they were sent into the sunset. "Leader" derailment has also happened in many other institutions as well and has occurred and continued to occur too often to simply be a chance occurrence. These derailed leaders may have been altruistic leaders at one time, but surely altruism was not a mantra they embraced and retained in the latter stages of their careers.

VII. LEADERSHIP AND DIVERSITY

I will not be referencing a Wikipedia or Merriam-Webster definition of diversity here, but will rely on my personal experience

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17. *What is Servant Leadership?*, GREENLEAF CTR. FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP, https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/ (last visited Apr. 28, 2016).

18. ROBERT K. GREENLEAF, THE SERVANT AS LEADER 6 (1970).

and perspective on this essential topic. I say "essential" because any person occupying a leadership position in higher education is required to devote significant time and effort to issues and concerns related to diversity. Suffice it to say that diversity is simply a term that means "difference." You would think that prevailing philosophy supports the notion that we are all different; diversity is much more involved and complex than that.

While attention to diversity is necessary in any workplace, I will focus more so on how diversity plays into the world of the higher education leader. A department head, dean, provost, chancellor, or president must be ever ready to account for their efforts in regard to how those efforts promote a diverse academic environment at the educational entity where they lead—whether that entity is a program, department, college, or entire institution of higher education. The degree to which the leader embraces diversity will be constantly monitored. These leaders will be evaluated by students, faculty, alumni, and those to whom the leader reports on the extent to which diversity is incorporated into the educational entity the leader leads. The diversification of the student body, staff, and faculty will be under constant scrutiny, as it well should be. The leader will be judged on the basis of the extent to which underrepresented individuals from these populations are recruited, retained, and supported by their educational entity.

The term "underrepresented" has evolved significantly in higher education over the past ten to twenty years. It is no longer just about race. Most, if not all, higher education institutions have offices whose primary responsibility is diversity, and in addition to race, these offices pay significant attention to religion, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender distinction, and other areas deemed to represent difference. On the campus of the University of Tennessee, and many other college campuses around the country, housed within the Office of Diversity and Inclusion are the Commission for Blacks, the Commission for LGBTQ People, the Commission for Women, and the Council for Diversity and Interculturalism. It has only been within the past three years that the University of Tennessee instituted the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. The significant emphasis on this area of institutional governance and leadership oversight has greatly changed the landscape of leading in the twenty-first century.

Regardless of your disposition toward diversity, if you aspire to be an academic leader in higher education, you will need to embrace, embody, and emphasize the importance of diversity within the unit for which you serve. It will not be enough to merely pay lip service to this topic. If your personal beliefs, from whatever orientation they emanate, will not allow for a genuine and altruistic dedication of time and effort to this concept, then leadership may not be in your cards.

POSTLUDE

Now back to Ubuntu! If you give very serious and deep consideration to the meaning of Ubuntu, it should not be difficult to determine that all of the dimensions of leadership discussed in this article are central to this African philosophy. When one personalizes the interpretation of Ubuntu philosophy, or embraces the "I am because we are" mantra, it becomes clearer how emotional intelligence, wisdom, mindfulness, vulnerability, altruism, and diversity come into play. For me personally, Ubuntu brings meaning to my role as dean because who I am as a dean is because of the people and college that I serve. At least, this term embodies the sort of leader I strive to be. A good and effective leader is one who is respected by colleagues. Notice that I didn't say liked or loved. Good and effective leaders will not necessarily be liked or loved by all of their constituents. Because being a good and effective leader means that at times you have to deliver unpleasant news, hold recalcitrant faculty and staff accountable for their behaviors, initiate change that will not be acceptable to all, and sometimes, just plainly and simply say "no." On the other hand, if you are, in fact, fortunate enough to become a good and effective leader, you will celebrate more successes with your co-workers, achieve goals and objectives that will serve to make your unit more responsive to the needs of your consumers—in my case, students—and you will gain the respect of at least most of whom you come into contact with. In other words, you will be able to say: "I am because we are!"