

Being President vs. Doing President

by Dr. Steven B. Sample, P.E., *Illinois Beta '62*

ONE OF THE SHREWDEST and most contrarian insights about leadership I ever heard came from a man who—although outstanding in his academic field—wanted nothing to do with being a leader himself.

In the spring of 1970, when I was 29, I learned I had won a fellowship from the American Council on Education which would allow me to serve an administrative internship with Purdue University President Fred Hovde [*MN A '29*] for the 1970–71 academic year. I was elated by the opportunity. Despite having only recently been awarded tenure and promoted to associate professor of electrical engineering at Purdue, I was already leaning toward a career in administration. With the ACE fellowship, I would be able to spend a considerable amount of time learning about university governance without having to give up my research grants or my graduate students.

Soon after the award was announced, I happened to bump into a colleague, Vern Newhouse, who was a highly respected senior member of the electrical engineering faculty.

“So, Sample,” Newhouse said, “I see you’ve won some sort of administrative fellowship in the president’s office.”

“Yes, that’s true,” I said.

“And you’ll be learning how to become an administrator?”

“I suppose so.”

“And then you’ll probably want to be president of a university somewhere down the road?”

“Well, I don’t know. I guess I’ve thought about it now and then,” I said, somewhat disingenuously.

He smiled and said, “Personally, I’ve never had any ambition whatsoever to be an administrator. I am totally

inept at managing things. Why, as you may know, I can’t even manage my secretary or my graduate students. But I’ve been a careful observer of ambitious men all my life. And here, for what it’s worth, is what I’ve learned: many men want to *be* president, but very few want to *do* president.” And with that he wished me well and walked away.

My experience over the last 30 years tells me that Professor Newhouse was absolutely right. Some of the unhappiest people I know are those whose aspirations for a high-level leadership position were finally satisfied, and who only then found out that they didn’t really want to do what it is that the position required. They had spent years clawing and scraping their way up the side of the mountain, and upon reaching their goal discovered that the realities of life at the top were a far cry from what they had imagined them to be.

Because I’ve been a university president for nearly 20 years, I’m often called upon to provide career counseling for people who aspire to similar positions. My advice is usually both encouraging and cautionary. On the positive side, I tell them that being the leader of a large and complex academic institution is the most enjoyable and rewarding job I’ve ever

had or could ever imagine having. But I also share the Vern Newhouse story with them, noting that my profession is overflowing with unhappy people who worked assiduously and made enormous sacrifices to become presidents of prestigious universities, simply because they believed that was what they were *supposed* to do, and in the process gave up their chance to do what it was they really wanted to do and were really good at.

Leadership is a peculiar kind of calling. Major leadership roles, particularly at the level of a chief executive, aren’t necessarily appropriate for those who have achieved distinction in positions which may be, in a hierarchical sense, lower on the totem pole. Nor should such



USC President Steven B. Sample (left), here co-teaching “The Art and Adventure of Leadership” with renowned management expert Warren Bennis, is the author of *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership*, a new book that has won accolades from a range of influential figures from the worlds of industry, government, and academe. Bennis, who recruited Sample to USC, wrote the foreword to the book.

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persons, however gifted they may be, necessarily *want* to take on positions of leadership in the institutions of which they are a part. The best physician won't necessarily make a good hospital administrator or medical dean, the best engineer won't necessarily make a good division president, the best teacher won't necessarily make a good school principal, and the best athlete won't necessarily make a good coach. There is no shame, and often much merit, in a person's simply deciding he's not cut out to have power and authority over, and responsibility for, a large number of followers.

Many people aren't aware of the fact that leaders must frequently subordinate the things which they're most interested in, or which they feel are most impor-

tant, to the urgent (but often ephemeral) and sometimes trivial demands of others.

These others may include lieutenants, the media, politicians, protesters, board members, customers, employees, financial analysts, faculty committees and organizers of black-tie dinners.

As I always tell those who aspire to academic leadership, "Along with helping to guide and shape one of the most noble and important institutions in society, a university president must also kiss a lot of frogs!"

In this regard I have come up with Sample's 70/30 Formula for Leadership—to wit, under ideal conditions up to 30 percent of a leader's time can be spent on really substantive matters, and no more than 70 percent of his

time should be spent reacting to or presiding over trivial, routine, or ephemeral matters. Freshman CEOs often enter the fray determined to spend most of their time as true leaders (i.e., working on issues that really count) while delegating all the trivial parts of their job to staff. Such naïfs are generally gone in a year or two, victims of a dragon born of minutiae which could have been easily slain in its infancy, but which suddenly grew to man-eating proportions. In other words, most of a top leader's time must necessarily be spent dealing with trivia and ephemera if he wants to survive and maintain his effectiveness as a leader over the long haul.

The real danger implicit in Sample's 70/30 Formula is that the 30 percent of a leader's effort devoted to important matters (such as independent thinking and inspiring his followers) may shrink to 20 percent, and then to 10 percent, and then to 5 percent, and finally to nothing, as the press of trivial and routine matters ultimately consumes all of his time and energy. I know scores of corpo-

rate CEOs and university presidents who find themselves in this position and who feel impotent and unhappy as a result. It requires enormous discipline for the top leader in an organization to maintain the substantive component of his job near the 30 percent level.

Of course, there is no bright line separating substance from trivia and ephemera. Moreover, an activity which appears to be trivial or routine at the outset frequently turns out to be substantive, and vice versa. But on balance, Sample's 70/30 Formula provides a practical upper limit on the fraction of a leader's time and effort which can be spent on really important matters.

Thus the person who wants to *do* president (as opposed to simply *be* president) should be delighted with a 70/30 split in favor of trivia over substance. By contrast, people who need a higher percentage of substance in their lives should stay away from top leadership positions.

THE NEWS MEDIA are a challenging reality in the life of most leaders, at least in those countries fortunate enough to have a free press. The question is, how can a leader get the media to accurately present his side of the story, especially if (as is so often the case) the media's preconceived ideas about the story are negative with respect to the leader's organization or the leader himself?

Let's face it, it's extremely rare for an investigative reporter from a major newspaper to call you up and ask you how you happened to be so successful during the preceding quarter or what it is you feel you need from the city and county governments in order to add a thousand jobs to your workforce or how you enjoyed your much-deserved vacation. More commonly the reporter wants to know whether you have anything to say before he publishes a story the next morning based on anonymous allegations of illegal behavior on you or your company's part, or why it is that your most recent quarterly profits are below what you had projected. Readers are much more interested in bad news and scandals than they are in good news and spectacular achievements.

A contrarian leader often takes a prophylactic approach to minimizing the negative impact of the media. He spends considerable time getting to know key publishers, editors, and reporters on a personal basis before a bad-news story about his organization is on the front page. He *never, ever* lies to the media, although he might very well refuse to respond to all their questions or satisfy all their demands for information.

A contrarian leader feels free to complain to the appropriate editor or reporter when a story about the leader's organization is obviously in error or grossly slanted, but he grins and bears it if the story is approximately true and even remotely evenhanded. Being able to take a public whipping from the media when you deserve it, and to do so without whining, gives you more credibility when you subsequently complain about coverage which is patently unfair.

In addition to trying to minimize bad news, the contrarian leader works hard at the much more difficult task of getting the media to carry good or even inspiring

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stories about his organization. Most media people are confirmed cynics; thus a major challenge for the leader is to get reporters and editors to trust him and his motives. In addition, it's often possible to win over news people by giving them advance access to stories which will interest their readers and, as a consequence, please their bosses.

USC's biggest triumph in the area of positive news coverage occurred in the fall of 1999 when we were selected as *Time* magazine's and the *Princeton Review's* "College of the Year 2000." I remember receiving a phone call that August from a senior editor of *Time*, who said, "You know, Dr. Sample, we've had one of our best investigative reporters on your campus for the last three weeks." I said, "Yes, I'm aware of that, and frankly it's made us a little nervous." And then she said, "I'm calling

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to tell you that, as a result of our investigation, we've selected USC to be our College of the Year 2000!"

When the issue came out, we ordered 300,000 reprints of the article—reputedly the largest reprint order in the history of *Time* magazine—and within two weeks we had to place another order for an additional quarter-million copies. Today, we still get requests for reprints. The joke around campus is that every living Trojan in the world has received at least two copies and every deceased Trojan at least one.

As you might expect, I was pretty excited about this recognition when it was first announced. In fact a couple of weeks after the announcement was made,

Malcolm Currie, the former chairman of Hughes Aircraft who was then chairman of USC's board of trustees, had one of the reprints cut apart, had each page laminated in plastic, and then had the pages rebound with a small spiral binder. He presented it to me at a board of trustees meeting and said, "Here, Steve, now you can take the damned thing into the shower with you and read it every morning!"

A really talented leader can even use a hostile press to get his story out to followers and supporters. The two most gifted practitioners of this rare art in American history were Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Their situations were quite different: FDR was a liberal who faced a largely conservative press, and Reagan a conservative who faced a largely liberal press. But both men were able to speak through the media to their countrymen. And no matter how hard the press might have tried to distort their messages, somehow these two presi-

dents were able to consistently connect with the American people.

AN EFFECTIVE CONTRARIAN tool for garnering both media attention and the attention of the public at large is what I like to call "counterintuitive hooks"—short, one-sentence statements which sound patently false but which are in fact absolutely true. As was pointed out in Chapter 1, most people are binary in their thinking—they feel compelled to immediately classify everything they hear as either true or false. Consequently, when they hear a counterintuitive hook, they can't get it out of their mind—it just won't stay put in either the "true" or the "not true" box in their brain.

A simple example will illustrate the concept of a counterintuitive hook. Shortly after I became president of USC I was working with a colleague on an outline for an upcoming speech. The draft she had given me included the line, "USC is one of the largest private employers in Los Angeles." I circled this line and said, "We need something more quantitative here."

"Like what?" she asked.

"Well, like 'USC is one of the 10 largest private employers in L.A.'"

"But Steve, I'm sure we're not one of the 10 largest."

"OK," I said, "Then we're one of the 15 largest or 20 largest, or whatever. Just find out what our rank really is, and we'll put it in the speech so our listeners will have a quantitative takeaway."

The next day she came to me and said, "Steve, you won't believe this, but USC is by far the largest private employer in the whole city of Los Angeles."

"Martha, are you *sure*?"

"Absolutely," she said, and showed me the hard data.

"Well," I said, "The data are incontrovertible. But in my heart I don't believe it, and neither will my audience."

"So then, we should take it out?" she asked.

"Oh, no," I replied, "Leave it in. It will stick in the minds of all who hear it. They'll know intuitively that it simply can't be true that USC is the largest private employer in L.A.; they'll be certain that that accolade belongs to an aerospace firm or a movie studio or a bank or some other company inside the city limits. But they'll also figure that the president of USC is not a liar and that he probably did his homework before making such an outrageous statement. Because most people are uncomfortable with ambiguity, this little puppy will bounce back and forth in their brains for a long time between 'true' and 'not true.' And when they finally learn that our hook is absolutely true in every respect, they will be left with a lasting positive impression of USC."

Indeed, that's exactly what happened. Scores of people from around the country challenged the idea that a university could be the largest private employer in the second-largest city in the United States. Hundreds of others simply didn't believe it. Even the media treated this counterintuitive hook with great care and skepticism—e.g., "USC claims to be the largest private employer in Los Angeles," or "It is alleged that . . ."

Then suddenly this particular hook became a universally accepted fact. People by the dozens would come up to me and say, "Steve, did you know that USC is the largest private employer in Los Angeles?" Newspapers printed it as a simple declarative sentence, as though all their readers already knew it. During the 2001 NCAA men's basketball tournament I heard it cited by sports announcers on national television as a well-known fact about Los Angeles.

From a more practical standpoint, this counterintuitive hook began to elevate USC in the eyes of donors, politicians, business leaders, and other influential people. They sensed (correctly, I believe) that 15 or 20 years ago USC would not have been L.A.'s largest private employer, and that the university had moved into the number one spot, not by virtue of its own growth, but by the demise or flight of other large employers which theretofore had been located within the city limits. Thus, as these leaders discovered that USC was L.A.'s last remaining large employer in the private sector, they developed a more protective and supportive attitude toward the university.

There are innumerable ways in which a leader can use counterintuitive hooks to the advantage of his organization or movement. A few others that have been helpful to USC and our eponymous region are:

- USC, located in the center of Los Angeles, enjoys a substantially lower crime rate than either Stanford or Harvard.
- Higher education in Southern California is a larger industry than aerospace.
- The world center of the biomedical technology industry is Southern, not Northern, California.

The key is that each such counterintuitive hook must be absolutely true. A hook which is an exaggeration, or which cannot be readily verified with hard data, can backfire in very unpleasant and counterproductive ways.

WHEN I WAS A JUNIOR in high school one of my teachers said to me, "Steve, you are by nature a perfectionist; you never know when to stop trying to make a thing better. So here's something for you to keep in mind: Anything worth doing at all is worth doing poorly. It may be worth more if it's done well, but it's worth something if it's done poorly."

Now there is contrarian advice with a vengeance! When I first heard it I thought my teacher was an idiot. But since then, as I've had to live with my inborn perfectionism for 45 additional years, I've come to see that my teacher wasn't as stupid as I thought he was.

Conventional wisdom talks incessantly about the pursuit of excellence at any cost, about leaving no stone unturned in an unrelenting quest for the highest possible quality, about sparing no expense in order to achieve perfection, and so forth. Such maxims may make good sense for followers and managers, especially if they happen to be naturally inclined toward sloppiness and second-rate performance. But the very notion of perfection is almost antithetical to effective leadership.

As has been pointed out several times in earlier chap-

ters, leaders in the real world are almost always forced to make trade-offs among competing priorities. If, in quest of perfection, a leader is willing to allow one of these priorities to have unlimited access to the limited resources (e.g., time, space, money, people) available to him, all the other priorities will surely suffer, and the leader's organization will almost surely fail.

Whatever it is you're doing can always be done better, and hence there is no upper bound on the amount of resources that can be consumed in the pursuit of perfection. Thus, the contrarian leader's maxim in this arena is this: *Anything worth doing at all is worth doing just well enough.* The tricky job for the leader is deciding what "just well enough" means in each particular situation.

When General Patton was chasing the German army across Europe in 1945 and found his way blocked by a destroyed bridge across a major river, he wasn't interested in building a new bridge that met the highest standards of excellence; he wasn't even interested in building the world's greatest temporary bridge. All he wanted was a bridge that was *just good enough* to allow his tanks and troops to cross the river, and to cross it only once.

The same sort of principle applies to product development in competitive industries. The corporate graveyard is full of defunct companies that literally spared no expense in perfecting their product, and then found there were no customers willing to pay the price which such a perfect product required in order to be economically viable. By contrast, successful companies are smart enough to quit chasing product perfection when the incremental cost of further improvements exceeds what people are willing to pay, or, equivalently, when such further improvements are not all that beneficial to the end user.

WARREN BENNIS ONCE TOLD ME that he was an example of a person with an excellent personal radar; such people are extremely sensitive to the thoughts, feelings, and wishes of others, and as a consequence are constantly turning their attention from one thing or person to another, and then another, and then another. Bennis added that he thought I was an example of a person with a good internal gyrocompass; such people can stay steadily on course no matter how many distractions may impinge on them from every side.

The problem is that neither a good personal radar nor a good internal gyrocompass is sufficient to make a person an effective leader. The radar-equipped find it hard to stay on course long enough to get anything accomplished, while the gyro-equipped are liable to run into an iceberg at full steam.

The contrarian leader knows he should have both. And if he's not blessed with both from birth (and practically no one is), he knows he must either develop an artificial radar (or an artificial gyrocompass, as the case may be), or recruit a lieutenant who has the particular property which the leader lacks.

Here we might draw a parallel to Machiavelli's dictum that it is best for a leader to be both feared and loved, but

if he must make an exclusive choice between the two, he should prefer to be feared. Similarly, if a leader must choose between being sensitive to others and being able to stay on course, he should prefer the latter.

A close cousin of this last principle is attributable to President Franklin Roosevelt, who said that “energy is more efficient than efficiency.” No matter how sophisticated a potential leader may be in thinking free, artful listening and making decisions, the contrarian knows that drive and enthusiasm have a lot to do with determining who wins and who loses at the end of the day. In his book *Being Lucky*, Herman Wells, the famous mid-twentieth-century president of Indiana University, made essentially this same point. It helps to be smart and creative, Wells noted, but the two most important ingredients for successful leadership are energy and luck.

Finally, no organization can survive in the long term if its leader eschews all change in an effort to preserve the status quo. As noted earlier, the essence of leadership is motivating followers to change, and this is true even for conservative organizations and movements. As G.K. Chesterton once said:

Conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of changes. If you leave a white post alone it will soon be a black post. If you particularly want it to be white you must be always painting it again; that is, you must be always having a revolution. Briefly, if you want the old white post you must have a new white post.

WHEN A PERSON FIRST ATTAINS a top leadership position, he’s often dazzled by the perquisites and deferential treatment which accompany high office; indeed, these may well be the things that motivated him to seek the top job in the first place. But soon these ephemeral glories fade, and he’s left with the realities of his job—the nitty-gritty of day-to-day leadership. It’s then that Vern Newhouse’s insight, cited at the beginning of this chapter, comes into play. Does this person want simply to *be* president, or does he really want to *do* president? If the



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Dr. Sample is an engineer, musician, outdoorsman, inventor, and author of an acclaimed book, *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership*, a Los Angeles Times best-seller. The book was chosen by the *Toronto Globe and Mail* as one of the top 10 business books of 2001 and has been translated into five languages. He is a member of the National Academy of Engineering, and his patents on digital appliance controls have been licensed to practically every major manufacturer of appliance controls and microwave ovens in the world and used in 300 million home appliances.

Dr. Sample is a trustee of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council and the Regenstrief Medical Foundation and is a director of several corporations. He is a co-founder and chair of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities, a consortium of 34 Pacific Rim research universities, and is also a past chair of the Association of American Universities, a consortium of 63 leading North American research universities.

latter, he might contribute something great and lasting to his followers and the organization they comprise. But if he only wants to *be* president, the sooner he’s removed from office the better for everyone concerned, including the leader himself.

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