IT’S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT 40 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE I JOINED THE FACULTY AT BAYLOR. MY CAREER, LIKE MOST, HAS HAD ITS UPS AND DOWNS, BUT I FEEL IT’S BEEN MOSTLY “UPS” SINCE THAT DAY IN THE FALL OF 1971 THAT I FIRST WALKED INTO A HANKAMER CLASSROOM. I THANK GOD THAT HE HAS ALLOWED ME, IN SOME SMALL WAYS, TO HELP LEAD THIS INSTITUTION THAT I LOVE SO MUCH.
I’ve seen many leaders (both formal and informal) come and go at Baylor and other academic institutions during the last 40 years. Although I’ve held positions of formal leadership at various times, I prefer to be regarded as an “informal” leader, because it is earned through the respect of one’s colleagues and tends to endure longer than leadership by title alone.

As important as leadership is, very few people actually have formal leadership training. Most of us have learned it in the school of hard knocks. In my opinion, the attributes of good leadership in academia are really common to those of other organizations: values, vision, engagement, communication, caring and stewardship. Although there are other leadership attributes, these are the ones that stand out most in my mind, because they have been demonstrated so prominently in the lives of the most effective leaders that I have observed. Conversely, one or more of these attributes have been lacking in formal leaders that I have regarded as less effective.
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Thomas’ scholarly work focuses on fraud prevention and detection, as well as ethical issues among accountants in public practice. He serves as the accounting and auditing editor of Today’s CPA, the journal of the Texas Society of Certified Public Accountants. He is the author of a textbook in auditing, as well as many articles in auditing, financial accounting and reporting, taxation and accounting education.

Prior to becoming a professor, Thomas was an accountant with the firms of KPMG LLP, and BDO Seidman LLP. He is a member of the American Accounting Association, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and the Texas Society of Certified Public Accountants.

Proverbs 29:18 says, “Without a vision, the people perish.” No institution, public or private, religious or secular, gets better by remaining the same. Vision requires members of an organization to see beyond the here and now and to envision how things can and should be. Good leaders must supply that vision and provide the spark that inspires others to see it as well. Weak leaders merely manage the status quo, and eventually the organization begins to weaken.

VALUES

Integrity, honesty and humility are life-defining values of every effective leader I have known at Baylor or elsewhere. There are no substitutes for these core values. Without them, persons placed in positions of leadership eventually fail, and in extreme cases have caused their organizations to fail. The other aspects of leadership flow from these internal values that serve as moral guideposts. They foster trust, which is an essential element in moving the organization forward.

VISION

Vision is not of much use unless the leader can inspire others to see it and to engage in fleshing it out. Nowhere is this more evident than in academia. I have often likened colleague engagement in academia to “herding cats,” because with the freedoms we enjoy, we academics often come to view ourselves as self-employed, as erroneous as that impression might be. So, whenever changes must be made, leaders must first demonstrate the capacity and willingness to engage in change themselves. Additionally, they must be role models, not only by showing others by example how engagement in the process can work, but by persuading, rather than dictating, others to engage.

ENGAGEMENT

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Good leaders must be effective interpersonal communicators. Many, if not most, of the problems that occur in organizations are the result of poor communication on the part of the leader. The most common modern example of weak organizational communication I can think of is “management by e-mail.” I must confess, I abused e-mail terribly as department chair. It seemed so much more efficient to communicate by sending a multiple-recipient e-mail than to pop into people’s offices to chat. One click of the mouse and it was done (or so I thought). I slipped into the habit of communicating most of my thoughts and those of others (the “fwd” button), by e-mail. I soon found that, despite my misplaced feelings of accomplishment in passing so much wisdom along, faculty members began to alienate me from their conversations because they felt I had no time for them personally. It took me a few years to realize that, when there are important issues to address, sometimes e-mail (and its newer counterparts Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) are weak substitutes for face-to-face conversations. True leadership involves learning how to express vision and engage participation through regular, persistent, human communication.

The wisest leaders soon discover that they are mere stewards, rather than owners, of the academic institutions they serve. I feel that three of the most important aspects of stewardship are holding on with open hands, grooming successors, and knowing when to let go. One of my mentors, former Dean Richard Scott, told me, “If you want an illustration of how essential you are to an organization, fill a bucket with water, insert your finger and pull it out. You’ll find that there are ripples for a moment, and then they’re gone.” No matter how seemingly indispensable academic leaders are, there comes a time for them to step down. After they depart, it doesn’t take long for them to fade into obscurity, while the organization moves on. I believe that effective leaders don’t hold on to their positions too tightly, because when they do so, they may egocentrically confuse personal and organizational goals. Effective leaders should also take time to identify promising successors, and to groom those successors by encouraging them to develop leadership attributes. Finally, discerning leaders develop a sense of timing that helps them know when to step down and let others take the reins. While they eventually disappear from the landscape, their values, passion and ideas remain.

We are blessed at Baylor to have had visionary leaders in the past. Our current administration and faculty are role models of leadership. Because of that, Baylor University and the Hankamer School of Business will remain an institution that develops Christian leaders who are capable of “lighting the ways of time.”