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Personal journey, with some obstacles overcome, lessons learned, and observations on leadership

Educational journey began in one-room country schools in rural Nebraska. Obstacles: Stuttering problem; polio at age 11, limiting physical activity.

Lessons learned:

- **Competitive disadvantages can be overcome by perseverance, hard work and preparation**
- **When faced with major obstacles, find another path**

No sports in high school, so became student manager for football and basketball teams. Attended University of Nebraska, became very involved in student organizations; multiple leadership roles as upperclassman. Worked summers in dairy/food industry processing plants in Nebraska and Oklahoma. Nebraska Human Resources Research Foundation courses and projects taught practical human relations skills. Lessons learned:

- **Real world experience enriches classroom learning experience**
- **Acknowledging others' successes and accomplishments has enormous positive impact on their attitude and morale; ditto to saying thanks for a job well done**

One year in food processing company, followed by graduate school at Oregon State University. Minor obstacle: Major professor left following completion of Masters degree; remained at OSU to work with a former new faculty member who had been a fellow graduate student.

Lesson learned:

- **There are no guarantees in life, and one will face unanticipated choices along the way; once a decision is made, it must be considered the right choice**

Considered both industry and university employment after graduate school; ultimately decided to become a faculty member in a newly formed Food Science and Technology department at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L). Appointment was a three-way joint appointment with teaching/advising as the largest component, plus research and extension responsibilities. Enjoyed early career success in all three roles, particularly in teaching and advising. Joined early morning Toastmasters Club for several years to develop better public speaking skills.

Lessons learned:

- **Balancing time demands among multiple responsibilities and between work and a young family are a challenge for early career professionals**

- **Each of us is responsible for our own self-improvement**

Four years into my faculty career, accepted a one-half time appointment as assistant director of resident instruction within the College of Agriculture, with principal responsibility for the college's advising, scholarship and recruitment programs; an opportunity for professional growth beyond my faculty role and academic department. Experience included new insight on our influence on others from a college wide advising workshop.

Lesson learned:

- **We should never lose sight of the influence we have on others by taking time to point out their strengths and encouraging them to maximize their potential**

Director of resident instruction resigned to return to a faculty position as I entered my second year as assistant director; served as interim director for one year while a search was conducted.

Lesson learned:

- **My career choices were influenced primarily by encouragement from others and the professional growth opportunity presented by a new opportunity (rather than any predetermined set of career goals)**

My department head became the new director. After a search process, I was chosen to be the new department head. Worked with the faculty to develop a process for periodic performance evaluation of the department head and strengthen partnerships with the food industry, which ultimately led to the establishment of a new Food Processing Center. A significant obstacle was the resistance of some faculty to the notion of closer relationships with industry. The center attracted the attention and support of the current governor and leveraged additional financial support from the state department of economic development. Ultimately, the faculty came to accept the concept of the center, with the department head also serving as the director of the center. I also served as administrative advisor to the Food Protein Research Group, an interdisciplinary research group that ultimately attracted major external research funding.

Lessons learned:

- **An opportunity to provide regular evaluation feedback on their unit administrator builds trust between the administrator and the faculty and a sense of teamwork within the unit**
- **Leveraging relationships with private and public sector partners can be very helpful in effecting cultural change within an organization**
- **Enormous power can be unleashed within an organization simply by bringing people together to discuss mutual interests**
- **Don't overlook the leveraging effect of a little seed money allocated to support interdisciplinary team initiatives**

From service on the search committee for head of one of the largest departments in the college, observed major cultural change that occurred in that department with the change in leadership.

Lesson learned:

- **Faculty will respond to signals from the department head regarding expectations (which led me to ponder whether I was giving the right signals as a department head)**
- **Since the department head is closest to the faculty, students and external clientele, it is the most important leadership position in higher education in terms of impact on program direction and outcomes; a positive, “opportunity-oriented” attitude by a department head fosters similar attitudes among departmental faculty and staff**
- **In evaluating personnel and programs, focus on outcomes and impacts, not inputs**

At about this stage in my career, I became interested in the topic of leadership. Participation in a two-week North Central Region workshop for newly appointed administrators provided an important learning and growth opportunity and some valuable connections with other young higher education administrators. Chairing the search committee for the position of Vice Chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) presented another opportunity to observe the diverse leadership styles of an accomplished group of candidates.

Lesson learned:

- **Greater focus on leadership development (as opposed to selecting someone to a leadership position because they did something else well) will be important to future success of any organization**

Following seven years as department head, I became Dean and Director of the Agricultural Research Division/ Nebraska Agricultural Experiment Station. The position provided a wonderful growth opportunity, substantially broadening my engagement with the state’s agricultural industry. After two years in this role, the IANR Vice Chancellor became Chancellor of UN-L. I was ultimately selected to fill the Vice Chancellor position, so I once again reported to my former boss. In both of these roles, I was significantly involved in recruiting and hiring various department heads and other administrative leaders. A major challenge as Vice Chancellor was reaching closure on a controversial initiative to establish a regional college of veterinary medicine at UN-L. The new Chancellor and leaders of the state’s livestock industry strongly supported this proposal. Opinions were deeply divided across the campus community and among members of the University Board of Regents and the state legislature. The effort failed when it became clear that requirements imposed by state legislation could not be met. I quickly arranged visits to other colleges of veterinary medicine to explore possible partnerships, which ultimately led to a long term agreement with a neighboring university to accept a specific

number of Nebraska residents into their college of veterinary medicine. A Nebraska Congresswoman who was vice chair of the House Appropriations Committee requested a proposal for redirection to other Nebraska projects of the federal funds that had been appropriated for support of the construction costs, with a two day turn-around for a preliminary proposal. After quick consultation with the chair of the Appropriations Committee of the Nebraska legislature and an overnight proposal writing effort, a proposal was submitted to redirect the funds to two projects, a food animal veterinary teaching facility at the U.S. Food Animal Research Center at Clay Center at Clay Center, NE for students in the joint veterinary medicine education program, and new facilities for food processing and marketing faculty and staff of the Food Processing Center. Following a review by federal officials and conversations with external stakeholders, both the federal and state funds for these projects were approved. Lessons learned:

- **There is such a thing as a “window of opportunity”, and it usually doesn’t stay open very long**
- **In hiring processes, it is important to take care of candidates, with particular attention to the feelings of unsuccessful internal candidates**

Learning more about leadership:

In a 1984 speech, John W. Gardner articulated three observations about leadership that strongly resonated with my own observations of leaders I encountered in higher education and the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT):

- **In this society, leadership is dispersed to an extraordinary degree, dispersed throughout all levels and segments of society**
- **Most leadership which can be called effective involves a number of individuals acting in a team relationship**
- **There are many kinds of leaders, and many effective leadership styles**

Another career decision arose after five years as IANR Vice Chancellor at UN-L. The search committee for the position of Dean of the College of Agricultural Sciences (CAS) at Oregon State University (OSU) encouraged me to apply for that position. Although many questioned the wisdom of making a lateral career move, I entered that search, and was selected for this position. After the move to Oregon, I quickly recognized the loss of network connections, and devoted considerable time and effort in building new connections within the university and the state. This included meeting individually with the deans of each of the other OSU colleges in their offices to learn about their colleges and possibilities for collaboration with CAS. Major initiatives in the college were integration of research and extension functions and the establishment of two unique branch experiment stations, a coastal Oregon marine experiment station on the Oregon coast and a Food Innovation Center in downtown Portland, the state’s

largest city. These initiatives began with conversations with interested stakeholders and state agency partners, followed by articulation of the merits of each proposal. Strong advocacy by stakeholders resulted in both state and federal funding to support these new programs and facilities.

Lessons learned:

- **A fundamental expectation of a land-grant university is to stay close to the people; that is our heritage and our future**
- **Reinforcement of the “window of opportunity” observation noted earlier**
- **Ditto regarding the power that can be unleashed by bringing people together to discuss common interests**

Useful advice from a colleague:

Don't assume that you need to take ownership of issues or problems brought to you by others in your organization. When someone brings a problem for you to solve, the following four questions will help focus the conversation (and may temporarily increase the tension level):

- **What do you mean?**
- **How do you know that?**
- **So what? (or, what difference does it make?)**
- **What can be done about it? (or, what do you propose to do to solve the problem?)**

After four years as Dean, the Provost who hired me left OSU to become Chancellor of UN-L when my former boss became the President of the University of Nebraska System. The OSU president asked that I accept a two-year appointment which became 8+ years as provost and executive vice president. An early challenge in this role was managing a multi-year series of substantial budget reductions and corresponding reduction, restructuring or elimination of academic programs. A structured process was developed that included specific criteria for consideration of program reductions or elimination and clear communication of outcomes and rationale. Other major issues as provost included revision of OSU's promotion and tenure guidelines, restructuring of extended education as a university-wide and state-wide entity to include extension, and initiation of a new university honors college and an ethnic studies department. All of these required extensive internal communication and conversation. During this time period, I was invited to become a candidate for IFT national president. The OSU president said, “Go for it!” I did, and to my surprise, was elected. This meant even more delegation to my provost office colleagues over the next three years.

Lessons learned:

- **Times of great stress (e.g., major budget and program reductions) require extraordinary communication; don't assume that others in the organization have access to the same information that you use in making decisions**

- **Communication colleagues are professionals; use them!**
- **Reorganization/restructuring will not solve a personnel problem**
- **The larger one's scope of administrative and leadership responsibility, the more one must delegate responsibility and authority to others, and hold them accountable for outcomes**

After 8+ years as Provost, I faced another career choice. Diagnosis of breast cancer resulted in major surgery, followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatments and 10 years of hormonal therapy treatment. This impacted my energy level to the point that I became concerned that I could not continue to serve the university adequately in the Provost position. At about this time, the College Agricultural Sciences had decided to create a new position of executive associate dean. I transitioned to this position for a few years until retirement. Those years provided several interesting roles, including serving as extension agricultural program leader and serving part time for one year as the campus executive officer of OSU Cascades, a new campus in central Oregon.

Lesson learned:

- **There are times to step up, and a time to step aside**

Another opportunity that came following my return to CAS was the invitation to serve in a consulting and facilitator role in the development of a proposal to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for support of a Food Systems Leadership initiative. In consultation with Gail Imig from the Kellogg Foundation, a design team was selected to develop this proposal. Mort Neufville, NASULGC (now APLU) vice president chaired the group which consisted of 16 members from land grant universities, non-profit organizations, and private industry (see list on next page). This group met numerous times over a two-year period, and ultimately developed a proposal that was submitted to the Kellogg Foundation. A crucial meeting with a group of university presidents led to a clear understanding that what FSLI was both a leadership development and an institutional change program. Kellogg approved and funded the proposal for the initial five years of the program. Following processes spelled out in the grant proposal, North Carolina State University was selected as the host institution for the Food Systems Leadership Institute, and the University of Vermont and Ohio State University were selected as the initial two secondary host sites for FSLI workshops. Cal Poly University-San Luis Obispo later replaced Vermont. I served on the FSLI advisory and curriculum committees in the early implementation of the program. I also served for nine years on the APLU Food Systems Commission that provided program oversight to FSLI.

Lessons learned:

- **Effective leadership will be necessary to assure the future of any organization**
- **Experienced leaders have a responsibility to help develop future leaders**

- **And again, bringing committed people together is an effective way to create cultural change**

Thanks to the FSLI leadership team at North Carolina State University and the other participating universities on the development of an outstanding program that prepares broad-based leaders with essential core competencies to effect institutional change toward a broader focus on food systems. The program has now demonstrated its effectiveness for more than a decade.

Finally, some additional lessons learned from my overall career experience:

- **For any administrator/leader, their most important and lasting impacts will be from the personnel decisions they make**
- **Network connections will be important in your career development ; “It’s all about relationships” (Paul Axtell)**
- **Almost anyone to whom you take the time to listen will add to your wisdom (Andy Swiger)**
- **People will not remember what you did; people will not remember what you said; but people will remember how you made them feel (Maya Angelou)**
- **The joy is in the journey**

Food Systems Leadership Design Team

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