

THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

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We are all here today to celebrate Leadership. All of the members of this year's class and all of the nominees who will be members of a later class have each already shown leadership qualities.

But what are those qualities? What sets leaders apart? What makes people follow a leader?

Some say it is personal charisma that sets a leader apart - someone who's mere presence commands attention. While charisma is a great asset, most of us do not have it to rely upon. Instead, we have to become leaders the old fashion way, by earning it.

Leaders are result-oriented people. For a leader it is not enough to say that "we'll give it our best shot"; or "if we don't succeed, we will be satisfied that we tried." No, that works as we grow up, but when we are in a leadership position, our only goal has to be to succeed.

When I think about the responsibilities of leadership, I am reminded of a line in the second Star Wars movie. This was the episode when we were introduced to Yoda, the Jedi Master. On a remote planet Yoda was teaching young Luke Skywalker to learn the ways of a Jedi Knight so that he could save the universe. The training was difficult and after one important exercise which ended in failure, Yoda let out a sigh of despair. Luke responded that Yoda should get off his back because "I'm trying as hard as I can." Yoda replies "Do or do not, there is no try."

Those are words to remember. Not because we expect perfection. Only one perfect person has ever walked this earth, and we celebrated his ascension yesterday on Easter Sunday. We know that we will sometimes fail, that we will not be perfect, but unless we always strive for success we will failure too often.

Besides the expectation of success, what else does it take to lead? The most important quality of a leader is to recognize that leadership demands commitment, commitment to a worthy cause, something greater than ourselves and something of value to many. Commitment requires that we:

- Identify a goal;
- Lay out a plan;
- Motivate others to share our vision, and finally,
- To lead by example

We do this by letting others know that we expect success and are committed to achieving it. When things do not go well, leaders will not make excuses or blame others. No, leaders take responsibility, and if the effort fails, leaders regroup and work even harder.

Achieving success can be difficult, but if you will remember two words, and commit yourself to be guided by them, you will be on your way. Those two words are "PERSISTENT EFFORT."

These words are not new to any of us, but too often we fail to recognize their value. I came to understand the power of these words about twenty years ago while waiting in a small airport for a late arrival. There were a number of pictures on the wall, and after looking at them, I came upon a quote that had been framed and I began to read it. I was so taken by this quotation that I wrote it down word for word. Here is what it said:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more

common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan “press on” has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.”

This simple yet powerful message has been attributed to Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States.

I went home that night and told my wife, Ramona, about it and we decided to frame the quote and put it up on the walls of both Randi and Ron’s rooms at home.

I cannot think of a better attribute for a leader than one who commits to using persistent effort. The reason we all need persistent effort is because no matter how committed we are, no matter how well we plan, and no matter how hard we work, we will not always succeed. But if we allow ourselves to be motivated by these words and the deeds of others who came before us, we will be on our way.

For instance, Vince Lombardi is famous for saying that it does not matter whether you get knocked down, what matters is if you get up. Long before Coach Lombardi, Confucius said, “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

We have seen this from other high achievers throughout history. Thomas Edison was described by a teacher as being “too stupid to learn” and he was fired from his first two jobs for being “nonproductive.” He failed a thousand times before finally inventing the light bulb and when asked how it felt to have failed so many times he commented that he did not fail a thousand times, instead, the light bulb was an invention with one thousand steps. Albert Einstein, one of the great minds of all time, did not speak until he was four years old and could not read until he was seven years old. His parents thought of him as being subnormal and he was described by a teacher as being mentally slow.

In the business world, Walt Disney was fired from a newspaper job because he “lacked imagination” and went bankrupt before achieving success by building Disneyland.

Abraham Lincoln, perhaps our greatest President, lost six elections for local, state and federal office before finally becoming President. If he had not persisted and become President, we may have lost our Republic and we would not have all been together here this morning.

Across the pond, Winston Churchill went through similar travails before succeeding. He lost a number of political elections until becoming Prime Minister and went on to lead England through World War II with the words, “Never give up, never give in.”

In the world of sports, it is said that Michael Jordan was once cut from his high school basketball team. In his first season as an NFL Coach, Tom Landry’s Dallas Cowboys lost every game.

These great people exemplify the true spirit of leadership, but none of them would have achieved success without pursuing their goals with persistent efforts. On our Coast we can recall the accomplishments of people who have passed on during our lifetime. People like Glen Swetman, Leo Seal, Pat Santucci, Tommy Munro and Roy Anderson, Jr. They were giants among us, not just in matter of business, but more important, through countless hours of devoted volunteer community service. If you drive up and down the three Coastal Counties, through all of our cities and unincorporated areas, you will see the results of their good work. Those who knew these people, and who had the good fortune to be able to work with them, will tell you of the

years of constant effort they put in toward making the Coast a better place.

As terrible as Katrina was, it brought us many examples of true leadership. The efforts of Governor Barbour and the First Lady, Marsha, in Jackson and Washington, as well as handing out food and water here on the Coast exemplified the true qualities of leadership. Many other people in this room this morning also worked tirelessly to help lead our recovery. Much has been done, but much more is needed.

As we go forward, we must recognize that from time to time we hold ourselves back by the lack of Coastal unity. Too often we, and I mean all of us, let ourselves become divided over certain events. Things like where we went to high school. What can be more irrelevant than that when it comes to recognizing and acting upon our common interest. We live among each other, breathe the same air and to a large extent our futures depend upon each other. Yet we allow ourselves to become divided when two or more businesses, cities or counties compete for a project; or for a grant; or for a government contract. These kinds of events can, and often do create bad feelings and when that happens, we all lose.

The truth is, we all have much more in common than those things which divide us. Yet even today, we sometimes allow Coastal unity to be pushed aside by boundary lines drawn on a map. All too often we fail to see ourselves as others see us. I have been going to the Legislature in Jackson and to the Congress in Washington, D.C. for a lot of years and always I am asked "how are things on the Coast," or "what can we do to help the Gulf Coast." I do not recall ever being asked "how are things in Bay St. Louis, or Biloxi, or Gulfport, or Pascagoula, or any other city."

Is there any doubt that the shipyard in Pascagoula, the casinos in Biloxi, the State Port in Gulfport or Stennis and Infinity in Hancock County are great assets for all of us? We should see ourselves as others see us - as a coast community - as a people who celebrate the success of our fellow citizens and our sister cities and counties.

The challenge to each and every leadership class is to recognize that we are all bound together by our common interests, our common needs and our common hopes and dreams. We must also resolve to act upon these recognitions with persistent effort. If this year's class will do that, future generations will look back on us and say, "Thank you."