

Leadership

Let's turn our minds to successful institutions and successful people. I think it's fair to say they are always under construction. They are always adapting creatively to change and trying to do better, even if they're already doing very well.

One obvious reason for us all to remain under construction is that the world is constantly changing around us — its people, technology and understanding of reality. When I was in college geologists were just beginning to imagine that tectonic plates well beneath the earth's crust might be constantly sliding the continents around and crashing into one another. Well, it isn't just tectonic plates that are grinding away. The way we gather and exchange information keeps changing at blazing speed, and things keep bumping into us from all directions and cultural perspectives. We had best remain under construction lest we quickly become irrelevant.

So how do we prepare ourselves and our students not just to keep up, but to lead the way?

William & Mary, the alma mater of the nation, has always been about leadership. Leaders do matter, in my judgment. They matter enormously if they're up to the job. But they must be up to the job, excellent, or they can truly sink the ship.

The vision of our alumnus Thomas Jefferson produced the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and ultimately the opening of the West. Alumnus John Marshall produced seminal decisions that established the United States Supreme Court as an equal branch of the federal government. Yet another alumnus, James Monroe, put European powers on notice that their colonization or intervention in the Americas would no longer be tolerated. Those were bold, decisive actions of enormous import.

It is easy to conjure up examples on the other side of the ledger. Even though President of the United States, the indecisive and hapless James Buchanan watched helplessly as the nation slid into Civil War.

Herbert Hoover failed to act in the face of economic and social crisis. Neville Chamberlain turned his back on the mounting threat from Hitler. Lincoln, Roosevelt and Churchill rose to the occasion.

What is it that effective leaders do that matters so much to the success of the organizations they lead? There are many answers to this vital question. Here's my two cents worth, in very short form.

It's rare that anything out of the ordinary in an organization — political, academic, corporate, not for profit — actually gets done unless someone, a live human, a leader, cuts through the fog of competing priorities and ever-present uncertainties, identifies the key contemporary needs, and persuades people to move effectively to meet them.

So leaders spot things that need to be done and ensure priorities are set among them. Then they marshal the troops to pursue specific goals, and they keep the chase going by helping those involved work out their conflicts and deal with the tradeoffs.

Leaders keep morale high even when the going gets rough.

Leaders strike a sound balance between visionary optimism, on the one hand, and inescapable realities on the other.

Leaders don't confuse their own policy preferences with the matters of principle about which there can be no compromise. They are masters of compromise when crucial to advance the mission.

Finally, leaders provide contexts in which other people in the organization can do their best work. For people to do their best work, the context in which they're working needs to be congenial to focusing on the job at hand and devoting sustained time and attention to it, without being distracted by worry over whether the organization is being well led, or by fear that it's not dealing with its difficulties and taking advantage of its opportunities, or by paralyzing anxiety that the competition is gaining ground and the organization is about to hit the rocks. In other words, effective leaders provide a context in which people can do their best work for the good of the



whole and for their own personal development, as well as enabling the institution itself to move forward in full cry.

Effective leaders do matter. So we are thinking hard about leadership at William & Mary. We believe the way forward is not to prepare students for “a” job, but for “any” job. We want to give them the ability to think rigorously and deeply. We want them to learn how to solve problems, crafting creative solutions to opportunities and difficulties. We want to teach them to communicate well in writing and on their feet. We expect their time at William & Mary to leave them comfortable engaging people unlike themselves and perspectives different from their own, lest they find themselves crabbed and constrained amid the enormous diversity around them. We want them to embrace change, not shrink from it, so they can seize opportunities and overcome difficulties. We hope to help prepare them to live vitally and ethically and, in so doing, make the world a better place.

In short, we want them to do what William & Mary graduates have done for over 300 years — lead.

W. Taylor Reveley III
President, College of William & Mary