

“Leadership Character Makes the Difference in My Work”

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Excerpted from *Leadership Character*

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“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fail, and one falls, one will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help...two will withstand...a three-fold cord is not quickly broken.” ~Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

A few months ago, I had the privilege of speaking to a group of Church of the Nazarene educators in Johannesburg, South Africa. The setting was the first Consultation on Global Faculty Development for the denomination. Nazarene educators, particularly from the two-thirds world spent a week together probing the possibilities of an Academy for International Education in the Church of the Nazarene. My part in the conference program was to lead two sessions on the subject of institutional collaboration. The title of my presentations was “Institutional Collaboration as Academy Strategy.” I addressed the need for intra- and inter-institutional strategy as foundational for the denomination to “maximize access” to the rich resources of the educational institutions of the Church of the Nazarene worldwide, particularly in the two-thirds world.

It was a wonderful experience for me. I met many friends from around the world. However, something happened to me while I was there. My purpose was to assist other educators. Instead I found myself asking some hard questions about my leadership character at MVNU, and the degree to which I model the partnership and collaboration I “preach” at the institution I serve. I was asking probing questions about my personal integrity. Was the strategic process I thought I was championing at MVNU falling on deaf ears? If so, why?

I returned to the MVNU campus determined to share with the faculty and staff my “moment of truth,” to outline some specific steps for us to take together, and to request for the campus community to hold me accountable to my word. If “trust is the foundation of effective leadership” (Weens), then I must be the change I seek to produce in the MVNU faculty and staff before institutional collaboration is to become a way of life on our campus.

Let me summarize what I said to the educators in Johannesburg, and then identify some questions I asked the MVNU faculty and staff about our relationships.

I re-emphasized to the conference participants that “leadership rises up at the intersection of personal passion and public need.” I suggested that every organization needs a “champion” for the collaborative process, if partnering or collaborating is to become a way of life for an institution and not just an intellectual game. I presented some lessons learned at MVNU about collaboration.

- Using collaboration to manage change is challenging.
- A vision and need are required for success.

- Regular communication is the glue of collaboration.
- Active, committed leadership at the senior administrative level is required.
- The greater the trust and communication, the faster and more profound is the benefit.
- Institutional collaboration must become institutional strategy.

Using Winer's model, I asked the participants to evaluate their institutions regarding the following factors with ratings of high, medium, or low, even as I participated in the process by evaluating MVNU regarding successful collaborative efforts:

Environment: History and leadership? Favorable climate?

Membership: Trust? In member's self interest? Able to compromise?

Communication: Open and frequent? Established links?

Purpose: Attainable Goals? Shared vision?

Resources: Sufficient funds? Sufficient time? Skilled Facilitator?

Before I completed the presentation, I made some remarks using quotes I had included for them in a booklet I had distributed. But as I was speaking to THEM, I found myself speaking to myself as the MVNU President. I sincerely want to increase the level of involvement and trust between the administration and the campus community of employees. The power of three (or more) as affirmed in the Ecclesiastes is a powerful image and necessary concept for an institution seeking to make and embrace collaboration as strategy.

Indeed, institutional collaboration must become institutional strategy at MVNU. This is my passion. But it will not happen simply by the institutional president making pronouncements. It will happen if we within the academic community passionately believe with Helen Keller that "alone we can do so little, together we can do so much."

More specifically, I returned to MVNU and shared with the campus community the following commitments:

- I want to affirm to you that I am your brother in Christ with whom you can work as I and you fulfill our vocation or calling at MVNU.
- With this affirmation will come a renewed emphasis on continued training and development. The staff development committee is being restructured and will provide ongoing staff development throughout the year.
- I will work closely with a task force specifically and with the campus community during the next eighteen months to streamline the administrative and decision making structures. The goal is to facilitate, not inhibit, you in accomplishing your vocational assignments and realizing your ministry goals at MVNU. "None of us is as smart as all of us."

- The MVNU vision statement needs revising. I shared with the MVNU Board of Trustees recently that it needed to revise the present MVNU statement. The cabinet has reviewed a draft revision statement formed by Chaplain Sivewright and his team. I want each of you to review and comment on the statement before a final revision is prepared for the Board of Trustees to approve.
- A task force has been working to revise the MVNU master campus development plan in light of enrollment growth projections for the next twenty years and the recent acquisition of the Pinecrest farm across Martinsburg Road. The campus now consists of 401 acres. You will have another opportunity to review the several scenarios developed by the task force and our consultants before recommendations are forwarded to the Board of Trustees for consideration.
- A Board appointed task force is studying the issue of university status for MVNU. The MVNU faculty and staff will have an opportunity to discuss the information and tentative recommendations already forwarded to you in the mail.
- I want to find ways to periodically update the campus community regarding our progress in developing an operating budget proposal for the Board of Trustees. I believe you trust us, but I think the budget planning committee can do a more effective job in communicating with you the process, progress, problems, and potential regarding the budget building experience.

I shared with the campus community the African proverb that states, “*When the elephant fights, it is the grass that suffers.*” (Proverb of the Kikuyu people of Africa)

The proverb means that when the people in power (the leaders) fight, it is the “grass-roots” people who get hurt. I seek to empower and support the faculty and staff. Yet I wonder if the structure presently in place facilitates or inhibits the “grass roots” of this institution from working and relating at their peak potential.

I concluded my remarks to the faculty and staff by stating, “In a new and profound way since my Johannesburg experience, to a degree I don’t think has characterized me in the past, I want to understand, embrace and lead the academic faith community at MVNU from the perspective reflected in the eight commitments outlined above.”

Integrity. Character. Vulnerability. Community. Courage. Conviction. Gratitude. Hope. Trust. These words shape an institutional leader of an academic faith community who seeks to lead from a Christian value base. Have I succeeded in all that was outlined above to the MVNU faculty and staff? No! Interestingly, more was accomplished than one might expect. This issue, however, is not so much a “checklist” of accomplishments as the growth of the leader in both competence and character. And the growth of the led!

Since the event on campus when I presented the above material to the faculty and staff, I have continued to think about the broader theme of leadership character, particularly as the imperative relates to leading an academic community of faith in the midst of diverse personalities,

conflicting expectations, differing faith traditions, distinct assignments and various levels of maturity. Leadership character becomes the issue for the leader. Character counts-big time! Leadership character is the connection between “The Power of Three (or more)” and institutional collaboration. For institutional collaboration to become institutional strategy in an academic faith community, a spirituality of leadership must be forged and embraced. I seek to lead and learn from this perspective and commitment.

“May it be so Lord for me and the people with whom I serve.” Amen.