

KAWSE Lunch

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Cottonwood Room, K-State Union

Leadership Advice and Lessons Learned

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Over the years, I have collected a number of words that happen to start with the letter “P” and that reflect what I think are important personal and leadership aspects. The collection wasn’t really planned, but as with most collections, once you start with one or two in the collection, it becomes fun to add more as time goes on. Here are some examples of my “P” words.

P Words: Persistent, Punctual, Persuasive, Proud, Polite, Purposeful, Proactive, Prepared, Positioned, Perspective, Passionate

Today, I want to focus on the last three “P” words in this list and share some leadership advice and lessons learned that have been extremely helpful to me over the years. I hope they might be of help in some way to you too.

Be Positioned:

- **Understand yourself**

- Take time to be self-reflective; know who you are, what you're good at and what you're not good at, identify what your core values are; these will be your internal compass/guide; self-reflection is an on-going process.

- **Cultivate Essential Qualities**

- Internal drive, Curiosity, Confidence, Good Judgment, Integrity, Optimism, Service to others, High Standards/Expectations.

- **Tell the truth/ Develop trust (Never lie)**

- Truthfulness is developing trust by accurately reporting past facts.

- **Strive for a balanced life that you love**

- Mental, physical, social, spiritual, and cultural aspects all need to be nurtured. Can't give to others if you have nothing inside yourself to give.

- **Cultivate mentors and be a mentor**

- Mentors advise, advocate, teach, encourage, and give perspective.
- Develop a circle of mentors: mentors are a gift to yourself.

- **Discern what is Essential**

- Listen, Analyze, Synthesize, Compromise, Use Guiding Principles, Ask whether something is in the best interest of students/faculty/university.

- **Cultivate professional interactions with everyone**

- Treat others with respect, regardless of position.
- Be patient, open, candid and transparent.
- Focus on positive, constructive engagement.
- Be disappointed, not angry.

- **Develop decision-making principles**

- Maximize the good.
- Look for interconnections and fit circumstances into a family of issues.
- Act on principles, not personalities; Be Data Driven.
- Be fair; seek equitable solutions.

- **Understand difference between positional and personal power**

- Knowing what you are good at will help you understand the personal power you have, which is not dependent on whatever positional power you have.

Keep Perspective:

- **There are always three or more sides to every story and truth is somewhere in the middle**
 - Always work to discern the truth that is in the middle.
- **Never waste a crisis: It is an opportunity for change/reflection**
 - Great time to make changes, forge new paths, try new ideas and strategies.
- **No good deed goes unpunished**
 - No matter how good your intentions, there will most likely be some who will be unhappy with what you are trying to do. So, simply be prepared for this outcome. You can learn from that unhappiness, but don't let the fact that someone was unhappy discourage you from trying to do good things.
- **There are very few decisions in life you can't recover from. They may cost you some time and some money, but you can recover.**
 - Even though you have tried to think through all of the aspects of a decision, sometimes things don't turn out as you had hoped. That is okay, because then you can choose to do something else. There are usually some consequences of a decision, and those are typically time, money, or both, but don't let making a decision paralyze you. You can recover even if your choice turns out to not be the best decision.
- **"There is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hands. We seek problems because we need their gifts."** From *Illusions*, by Richard Bach
 - Gift of understanding/ empathy/ reflection/ forgiveness.
 - I come back to this saying again and again when I encounter problems. It helps me readjust my thinking and look for the "gift."
- **Recognize importance of robust teams**
 - Surround yourself with "stunning colleagues."
 - You don't do anything alone; Highlight contributions of others.
 - Don't be afraid to work with/hire people smarter than you.

- **Don't be afraid to take risks**
 - Take on difficult assignments or projects others don't want.
 - Typically learn more from failures than successes.
- **Everyone makes mistakes: how you handle them is important**
 - Yours: Take responsibility/Apologize; Correct as best you can; Learn from your mistakes.
 - Others: Be forgiving and as generous as possible; Provide advice; Work together to resolve.
- **Delegate/ask for help: Give others responsibility/chance to grow**
 - Even though you may be the best at doing something and you want to be in control to avoid mistakes, by delegating and allowing others the experience of learning and doing something new, you are the one who gains the most.
- **Be a strong advocate for Diversity/Equity**
 - Requires hard work; essential to create and have many partners.
 - Would like to see big, rapid changes, but that doesn't often happen.
 - Try to "deflect the line a little every day"; Remember that Change in small numbers is still change that multiplies!
 - Keep issues on the table, otherwise things can regress.
 - Use every opportunity to educate and advocate; see intersectionality.

Be Passionate:

- **Passion is the fuel that drives our efforts**
 - Find what excites & energizes you, what touches your soul. Then pursue it.
 - Realize you are "spending" your time. Identify how you truly want to "spend" (or invest) your time. Time is your most valuable resource.
 - Passions may, and probably will, change over the years. Keep being self-reflective to identify your passions.

One more P-word: Paint.

One of my favorite books is *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*, by Gordon MacKenzie. The last chapter is "Paint Me a Masterpiece." I want to share an excerpt from that chapter with you. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Paint Me a Masterpiece, pp 219-224.

First, close your eyes.

In your mind, conjure an image of the Mona Lisa. Visualize that masterpiece's subtleties of hue and tone as clearly as you can.

Next, shift to the image of a paint-by-numbers Mona Lisa. Envision the flat, raw colors meeting hard-edged, one against the other.

Now, open your eyes, and let me relate a fantasy about masterpieces, paint-by-numbers and you. It goes like this:

Before you were born, God came to you and said:

Hi there! I just dropped by to wish you luck. And to assure you that you and I will be meeting again. Soon. Before you know it.

God continues:

I was wondering. While you're over there on the other side, would you do me a favor?

"Sure!" you chirp.

Would you take this artist's canvas with you and paint a masterpiece for me? I'd really appreciate that.

Beaming, God hands you a pristine canvas. You roll it up, tuck it under your arm and head off on your journey.

Your birth is just as God had predicted, and when you come out of the tunnel into the bright room, some doctor or nurse looks down at you in amazement and gasps:

"Look! The little kid's carrying a rolled up artist's canvas!"

Knowing that you do not yet have the skills to do anything meaningful with your canvas, the big people take it away from you and give it to society for safekeeping until you have acquired the prescribed skills requisite to the canvas's return. While society is holding this property of yours, it cannot resist the temptation to unroll the canvas and draw pale blue lines and little blue numbers all over its virgin surface. Eventually, the canvas is returned to you, its rightful owner. However, it now carries the implied message that if you will paint inside the blue lines and follow the instructions of the little blue numbers your life will be a masterpiece.

And that is a lie.

For more than 50 years I worked on my paint-by-numbers creation. With uneven but persistent diligence, I dipped an emaciated paint-by-numbers brush into color No. 1 and painstakingly painted inside each little blue-bordered area marked 1. Then on to 2 and 3 and 4, and so on. Sometimes, during restive periods of my life, I would paint, say, the 12 spaces before the 10 spaces (a token rebellion against overdoses of linearity). More than once, I painted beyond a line and, feeling embarrassed, would either try to wipe off the errant color or cover it over with another before anyone might notice my lack of perfection. From time to time, although not often, someone would compliment me, unconvincingly, on the progress of my “masterpiece.” I would gaze at the richness of others’ canvases. Doubt about my own talent for painting gnawed at me. Still, I continued to fill in the little numbered spaces, unaware of, or afraid to look at, any real alternatives.

Then, there came a time, after half a century of daubing more or less inside the lines, that my days were visited by traumatic events. The dividends of my noxious past came home to roost, and the myth of my life began horrifically to come unglued. I pulled back from my masterpiece-in-the-works and saw it with an emerging clarity.

It looked awful.

The stifled strokes of paint had nothing to do with me. They did not illustrate who I am or speak of whom I could become. I felt duped, cheated, ashamed – anguished that I had wasted so much canvas, so much paint. I was angry that I had been conned into doing so.

But that is the past. Passed.

Today I wield a wider brush – pure ox-bristle. And I’m swooping it through the sensuous goo of Cadmium Yellow, Alizarin Crimson or Ultramarine Blue (not Nos. 4, 13, or 8) to create the biggest, brightest, funniest, fiercest dragon that I can. Because that has more to do with what’s inside of me than some prescribed plagiarisms of somebody else’s *tour de force*.

You have a masterpiece inside you, too, you know. One unlike any that has ever been created, or ever will be.

And remember:

If you go to your grave without painting your masterpiece, it will not get painted. No one else can paint it. Only you.

So, my Take-Home Messages are:

Be Positioned, Keep Perspective, and Be Passionate. And Paint!