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Guest Editorial

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...guest editorial

THE IMPERTURBABLE LEADERS – RITCH EICH

Too often, leaders exhibit the behavior of adolescents instead of adults: they berate employees, sport temper tantrums, or use excessive and unnecessary foul language. This type of conduct does nothing to improve employee performance, customer satisfaction, or shareholder value. In fact, it does just the opposite.

Real leaders are imperturbable: they have the innate ability to remain calm in the middle of chaos. That ability is an all-too-often ignored skill among leaders, overshadowed by today's seemingly increasing bombastic and egotistical outpourings. Imperturbable leaders know that keeping one's wits during the most difficult of circumstances can diffuse irresolvable conflict, anger, and tension, and channel it into needed, constructive change.

Three people immediately come to mind as examples of imperturbable leaders, all of whom I've had the fortunate experience to have known and worked with: John A. Hannah, president of Michigan State from 1941 to 1969, Robben W. Fleming, president of University of Michigan from 1968 to 1978, and Carol Tomlinson Keasey, founding chancellor of the University of California, Merced from 1999 to 2006. Although all three made an indelible mark in academia, their leadership skills are applicable to any industry.

None had big egos. They didn't need to be the center of attention or to make major speeches with great rhetorical flair. They were intelligent, yet humble — but nobody's fool. They did many things quietly, but not in an underhanded way. They had very strong values and great fortitude rooted in their upbringings. People naturally gravitated towards them.

Their determination also enabled them to be transformers. Against incredible odds and opposition, Hannah built Michigan State from a campus of 6,000 students into a prestigious Big Ten university of more than 47,000. By quietly focusing on relationships, he was able to procure more legislative funding for his school than other universities in the state. It enabled the school to grow and increase its diversity. It is not coincidental that the first African-American president of a major university was at Michigan State.

Under Fleming's leadership, the University of Michigan grew to become one of the country's premier and internationally respected public research universities. When Fleming took over, the Ann Arbor campus was at the forefront of campus unrest. His skill in negotiating with unmatched patience, tolerance, and reason throughout the anti-war and civil rights protests of the 1960s and early 1970s, without the violence and destruction that marred many other campuses, was nothing less than extraordinary.

Tomlinson-Keasey was given the herculean task of planning, securing funding for, and later opening a new campus, the University of California at Merced, in the middle of California's rich agricultural and culturally diverse San Joaquin Valley. With higher poverty levels, lower education rates, worsening air pollution, and an increasing medically underserved population more problematic than in any other part of California, a new campus was needed — one that would become a powerful economic engine for the valley and the state. Tomlinson-Keasey became the university's first female to occupy the top spot at any UC branch.

Hannah knew that many Michigan State students came from families whose incomes were modest at best, so he made his apartment available to a Michigan State athlete (before athletic scholarships were the norm). He permitted different student-athletes to stay rent-free in exchange for their doing routine cleaning and cooking chores. Fleming, while chancellor at the University of Wisconsin, used his own money to bail out jailed students who were arrested for blockading a university building during a campus protest. Both men, guided by morality and unselfishness, took a genuine interest in their students' welfare. How many university presidents do you think would act similarly today?

Fleming spent six years in the U.S. Army in World War II, but spoke out against the Vietnam War and helped spearhead international projects in Nigeria, France, Germany and Japan. His life experiences coupled with his study of law, especially labor relations, helped forge his open, poised, and conciliatory approach to conflict. Fleming had a Lincolnesque quality. He could not be easily provoked, believing insults had to be endured because conflict usually presented opportunities for improvement.

Tomlinson-Keasey used every bit of her indefatigable spirit, high energy stamina, and unwavering belief in youth to achieve her goals. Reluctant state legislators, working with four different gubernatorial administrations, nagging environmental issues, and a state budget crisis that delayed the opening of the campus by a year, confronted her at practically each step along the way. And so did fierce competition on the part of other UC campuses and the California State University (CSU) system vying for state appropriations and private monies, as well as often-provocative central valley pressure groups, a skeptical media, and formidable construction challenges. Tomlinson-Keasey envisioned students of immigrants, farm families, and others (often first generation college attendees) becoming tomorrow's leaders in science, technology, medicine, engineering, and the environment as a result of the new university.

In a *New York Times* story on the presidential leadership of U.S. colleges and universities that he believed no longer exists, a reporter wrote,

THEY (FORMER PRESIDENTS) CALLED FOR THE REFORM OF AMERICAN EDUCATION, PROPOSED SAFEGUARDS FOR DEMOCRACY, SOUGHT TO DEFUSE THE COLD WAR, URGED MORAL STANDARDS FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH, AND ADDRESSED OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES OF THE TIME.

They were willing to take a stand and speak out. When was the last time you heard a president of a major liberal arts college or prominent university speak out about any of the myriad issues high on the national or international agenda like immigration, poverty, surveillance, world unrest, income disparity, and more?

Hannah, Fleming, and Tomlinson-Keasey remained calm in the face of fierce and relentless criticism or confrontation. They committed to a larger goal than simply increasing the size of their organizations (in this case, universities). They chose to dedicate their lives and follow their deeply rooted principles to improving the lives of both students and the surrounding community.

WHILE NO LEADER IS PERFECT, WE CAN LEARN A LOT FROM THESE VALUES-CENTERED VISIONARIES.

— **Ritch K. Eich, Ph.D.**