

# Keeper of the Vision

By Steven T. Bossert

A new book

by Chancellor

Kenneth A. Shaw

provides practical

guidance for

improving

leadership skills

in higher education

Illustration By Marty Blake

As a researcher of educational leadership for two decades and a Syracuse University administrator for the past nine years, I was very interested in Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw's new book on university leadership. I was curious to know how our successful Chancellor viewed his own leadership style and situation. The chief executive's fast-paced, high-pressured hierarchical world all too often causes top leaders either to over-attribute events to external causes beyond their control, or to inflate their influence on organizational outcomes. Staying grounded in the core values of one's institution and keeping a realistic picture of oneself are key ingredients for success, but are very difficult to maintain. Kenneth A. "Buzz" Shaw knows this well: His own leadership style stresses communication and active engagement. In *The Successful President: "BuzzWords" on Leadership* (American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1999), he shares his secrets for success with other aspiring leaders.

The book is quintessentially Buzz Shaw. It is an unpretentious, practical guide to leadership. Its conversational tone is peppered with parenthetical comments that faithfully capture Shaw's wit and down-to-earth style. I couldn't help but hear Buzz's own voice echoing what I read.

Syracuse University's remarkable success story during this decade provides the backdrop for the book. By briefly telling the story of how the University responded to a substantial decline in undergraduate enrollment and a projected \$40 million annual deficit, Shaw helps readers understand core leadership tools: identifying essential institutional values, encouraging participation, managing group conflict, and articulating budget trade-offs. He claims a modest goal—to help new and prospective university leaders improve their skills by taking stock of their personal talents and motivations as well as their ability to manage groups. The book does not offer general prescriptions for leadership or for improving higher education in our country. Rather, it speaks about the essence of day-to-day activities that help a leader chart and maintain the institution's course. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala G'70 points out in her foreword that the book offers broad insight for leaders in all organizations.

The book is purposely organized into short, self-contained chapters

that invite the busy reader to digest one set of ideas at a time. Its main topics include definitions of leadership, interpersonal competencies, group dynamics, crisis management, and public relations. Shaw's ideas are firmly rooted in a conventional human relations approach to organizational change and leadership. He defines leadership as persuasion and the primary presidential role as "keeper of the vision." He emphasizes skills for managing group dynamics, effective communication, and conflict resolution. The key to leadership success is finding the right balance in the exchange equation of individual needs and organizational needs. His chapters on interpersonal competence and group knowledge are Shaw's primer on motivation and leadership self-awareness.

Having worked with Buzz Shaw for eight years, I clearly recognize his strategies for group management. He offers several rules of thumb for the aspiring leader: The most effective task group has between five and nine people; the efficacy of speeches, meetings, and ceremonies can be improved by cutting their time by at least 35 percent; the number of people who report directly to you should be limited to between 5 and 10; and more. Shaw's insights about organizational "grief" sensitize new leaders to their role in helping people let go of the past in order to move forward. At Syracuse University, this meant moving beyond finger pointing and into constructive planning for the future. Each idea is nicely illustrated by concrete examples in one of the book's eight chapters, or in an appendix containing samples of *BuzzWords*, the Chancellor's newsletter for the campus community. Throughout the book, Shaw challenges readers to appraise their own leadership skills and motives. He provides several personal inventory exercises that assess whether the university presidency fits with one's personal goals and character.

This book clearly reflects Shaw's innate trust that faculty, staff, and students will make rational decisions that benefit the university. The leader is responsible for framing, guiding, and constantly reminding members about the institution's purpose and goals so this rationality prevails. His treatment of "currencies," or motivators, is emblematic of this belief. There are inspiration-related currencies that fulfill people's desire to be associated with

some higher purpose; position-related currencies acknowledge the needs for recognition, visibility, and reputation; task-related currencies address resource and expertise needs; and so forth. The leader judiciously uses currencies to motivate action, realigning the equation as prevailing currencies shift. One method of articulating a group's currencies that Shaw advocates is the budget trade-off exercise. Shaw believes that

making trade-offs engages members in ways that disclose their views and needs as well as builds consensus for the leader's final decision. The book is less explicit, though, about how to navigate among various constituency views and conflicting currencies, or how to avoid the short-term, rational calculus inherent in trade-off exercises that may mask more difficult, fundamental moral obligations for the institution.

Some readers may be disappointed that the book does not provide a more personal leadership portrait of Kenneth A. Shaw. The closest glimpse comes in his caution that higher education leaders cannot expect the same kinds of friendships that others enjoy. Yet his optimistic, pragmatic personality shows through in the upbeat tone of the writing. Similarly, new college leaders might be eager to learn how a chancellor discovers the core institution values from among the many competing viewpoints on a campus that is experiencing organizational grief, as Shaw obviously did in articulating the student-centered research vision for SU. The book's somewhat thin account of Syracuse's transformation, however, does not illuminate this point. Of course, it was never Shaw's goal to include all of these details in this volume. Perhaps these aspects of Kenneth A. Shaw's leadership legacy will appear in his next book. I'll look forward to reading it.

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