Leading through Crisis
A Rationale for Hope

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Prior to 2020, most ordinary academics were not called upon frequently to apply ethical principles like justice in their everyday work. When they did, these opportunities were limited mainly to decisions for which the consequences rarely felt like they posed life-or-death stakes. As an ethicist and specialist in science policy and regulation, I frequently used to be called upon to opine about questions regarding the justice principle as it relates to study design, clinical trial recruitment, and oversight of research programs. Occasionally, I would be drawn into an ethics consultation pertaining to a particularly thorny problem related to alleged regulatory violations, scientific misconduct, or matters involving the potential for reputational harm to my employer. Other times, ethical dilemmas would emerge in the context of campus politics, such as during a departmental search for a new colleague. While interesting and important, these moments typically did not pose risks that an error of judgment would cause immediate and grave consequences.

Then, I accepted the role of college president on January 31, 2020. I knew it would be a difficult job, posing many challenges. I imagined the usual demands placed upon leaders of academic communities, and I felt a deep sense of humility about all that I did not yet know about how to navigate the unfamiliar terrain ahead. How best to support student success? How to foster the thriving of faculty and staff? How to increase access and equity across the campus? How to better engage alumni in the life of the college? How to deepen and strengthen relationships between the college and the local neighborhoods in the city? How to juggle the various demands on my time—including my obligations to family? How to raise the funds needed for new initiatives? These were the questions I pondered as I prepared to step into my new role on June 1.

Along came the COVID pandemic in February, plunging many people into fear, grief, and daily dilemmas about whether to get their hair cut, see a doctor for a non-urgent procedure, or visit an elderly relative. By March, most colleges and universities had vacated their dormitories and moved all

instruction online. By April, it was clear that students would not be able to return for the rest of the academic term. In May, most graduation ceremonies were celebrated online in a virtual format. By this time, it was clear to me that the job I'd been offered was not the job I would inherit. I prepared mentally to arrive at a campus in need of a leader who would be undaunted by the added challenges posed by this unprecedented public health emergency.

At the end of May, a national civil rights crisis began when righteous anger erupted in the wake of numerous cases of egregious and fatal police brutality against unarmed Black civilians, including the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by law enforcement officers. Together, the global pandemic that leveled cruel consequences inequitably and a national outcry about racial injustice resulted in dramatic changes to our social lives, municipal priorities, and civic organizations, including every institution of higher education.

As a consequence, leadership positions with institutional responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of others became exponentially more complicated and demanding. Amidst these choppy waters, I took the helm of a small liberal arts college located at the center of our nation's broken heart: the Twin Cities region of Minnesota.

Was it helpful to have had training in bioethics when confronting a global pandemic? Yes, undoubtedly. That knowledge and experience gave me the discipline and structure with which to evaluate options and perform risk/benefit analyses. I used the four principles of bioethics. I called upon my understanding of the limits of utilitarianism. I thought about the duties I had to the campus community, to my Board, to my loved ones. I summoned moral virtues, like courage and patience, but a crisis rarely permits enough slack to think theoretically. Indeed, leadership requires the practical application of principles without the luxury of hypotheticals. The consequences of wrong choices are too much to bear when the stakes are so high.

The college's leadership team and I worked through the summer to plan for the campus to re-open in fall with a myriad of public health precautions. We studied the scientific data. We assessed what other similar colleges were planning. We also ran financial models designed to inform the many cost-saving measures we would have to implement in order to reduce eye-popping deficits caused by lost housing revenue and unbudgeted expenses, such as COVID testing. At the same time, I delved deeply into the work of anti-racism and equity, engaging with student activists, with local leaders, and with colleagues at other colleges and universities to address the deep structural inequities that—though present all along—had been revealed

in a new light to those who previously had the privilege to ignore them. Perhaps most vexingly, all of this work was made more difficult by the fact that ninety percent of human interaction had to move online in order to reduce the spread of the virus.

As a new president facing these challenges, I was at a significant disadvantage. First, I did not know the physical campus, the people, the job duties, or even the geographic surroundings. Everything was new and confusing to me. Much of the cultural "iceberg" remained below the surface, and I could not see it. Second, I had to make consequential decisions about controverted issues under intense time pressure and without the benefit of a reservoir of earned goodwill from the college's students, faculty, staff, and alumni. They didn't know me and had no reason to give me the benefit of the doubt about the soundness of my judgment or the values that guided my thinking.

Some of the decisions I made had adverse outcomes for certain members of the campus community. To avoid layoffs, we froze salaries and hiring, and we temporarily suspended retirement contributions for all employees. All senior staff took a pay cut. We allowed only six hundred students to move into our residence halls in order to reduce housing density. That required canceling housing contracts for another six hundred or so students who were left to find another place to live just a month before the start of the fall semester. It also meant a significant loss of revenue. We rejected urging by the state that COVID testing be reserved only for sick people and paid for asymptomatic screening of our campus population. We changed the academic calendar, splitting each semester into two modules in which each student would take only two classes. We did this for a variety of sound reasons but found the experience was almost universally reviled by students for its velocity and compression. We canceled athletic competitions, sitting out seasons that other schools in our conference were willing to play, and we shortened spring break to discourage traveling.

It is too early for me to look back with wisdom and say with any clarity what I learned or whether in retrospect these were the "right" choices. We are still in the middle of the pandemic, with the US recently marking the loss of 590,000 people to COVID and no coordinated national program for speedy and effective vaccination. In addition, residents of the Twin Cities are still in pain over the killing of George Floyd and—more recently—Daunte Wright—by police. I can share observations about the principles and frameworks that guided my thinking about how to lead through this very difficult time in our nation's history.

First, with a hard nod to my training as a bioethicist, are the four principles of bioethics: autonomy, beneficence, justice, and non-maleficence (1979). While each principle is important, those experienced in applying them know that they very rarely can be maximized equally. In other words, they sometimes seem in competition or like they may cancel each other out. For some dilemmas, increasing justice might reduce beneficence. Likewise, an emphasis on respect of individual autonomy might limit justice. An understanding that tough choices include trade-offs is difficult to accept, but it's necessary in order to move forward without being paralyzed by endless analysis. Accordingly, when I accepted the idea that—while there might be obviously wrong choices—often there are multiple good ones, it liberated my thinking about possible paths forward.

Not all the decisions I had to make this year would be considered strictly the purview of bioethics. Some were straightforward financial decisions made to preserve the economic stability of the college or logistical decisions made to reduce workload for people under a tremendous amount of stress. Nevertheless, these choices had ethical dimensions, and I found that the four principles of bioethics provided a reliable heuristic. Allowing faculty to decide whether to teach remotely (maximizing autonomy) might reduce the satisfaction and happiness of students (reducing beneficence). Also, remote teaching might not be fair as some students would not have access to reliable Wi-Fi or a quiet place to dial in for an online class (reducing justice). Forcing faculty to teach in person (reducing autonomy) might make some students happier (increasing beneficence) but expose students and faculty to higher COVID infection risk (reducing beneficence). Not all people are equally vulnerable to the disease, so allowing people to sort themselves by preference necessarily would yield inequitable health outcomes because of differences in privilege (reducing justice). Encouraging students to protest police violence supports their freedom of expression (maximizing autonomy) but might expose them and the rest of our community to the virus (reducing beneficence). Frequently it was the (arguably) most misunderstood bioethics principle, non-maleficence, that brought me up short: considering two or more less-than-ideal solutions, which inflicts the least harm? By what scale do we measure to compare the pain of potential lost lives against the material consequences of lost livelihoods?

The second framework that guided my leadership in this difficult year was the Stockdale Paradox. This is a concept made famous in Jim Collins's bestselling book *From Good to Great* (2001), which told the story of Admiral

James Stockdale, who was a POW during the Vietnam War. Stockdale survived, while many others did not. When asked why he thought that was so, he is quoted as having said, "You must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and at the same time, have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." This particular brand of stoicism may not appeal to everyone but, as observed by Groysberg and Abrahams (2020), the Stockdale Paradox provides an especially useful way to think about the role of the leader in a crisis.

Per the paradox, an effective leader must be honest about the challenges they face, provide empathy about the consequences of those challenges, and offer a rational basis for hope that things can improve. Offering hope in the face of a lethal global pandemic and a national civil rights crisis is not easy. It doesn't mean ignoring the daunting realities we face in favor of a rosier outlook. It means naming the pain and grief caused by the virus, calling out racism and other forms of bigotry, being honest about the inequitable ways the virus affects underserved and marginalized communities, and inspiring belief in a realistic plan for moving forward. I use the word "forward" here deliberately as an intentional alternative to the notion of "returning to normal." If this year has taught us anything, it's that the old normal wasn't working well for everyone. In the old normal, social determinants such as zip code and skin shade could predict disparate healthcare outcomes, educational attainment, likelihood of incarceration, and infant mortality. In the old normal, we were guided more often by "we can't because" thinking rather than "we could if" thinking. When we are past the pandemic, we should not strive to return to that normal because it was unfair. Which brings us back to justice.

One new leader at one small college cannot undo generations of structural inequality that undergird our society. Nor do I have the skills to invent a coronavirus vaccine or cure. After this whirlwind of a year, I still have a lot to learn as a college president. But one thing I know is that all leaders in all sectors and at all stages in their careers have an opportunity right now to reject the comfort of familiarity when old habits uphold systems that do harm. Choosing to imagine a different future under challenging circumstances is what Thomas Homer-Dixon (2020) calls "fighting a scarcity of hope."

Despite circumstances that may temper our evolutionary inclination toward optimism, I do have a rational basis for hope that, if we see injustice, and we name it—with empathy about its consequences and clear eyes about

what it will take to root it out—then, together, we can build an alternative vision for the future. We can create a new normal that retains and applies all the lessons we learned this year about inclusion and equity, about ingenuity, and about our tolerance for change. Indeed, we must do so.

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