

Leading Positive Change in Academia

Brad D. Smith

Author affiliations are listed at the end of this article.

Corresponding Author:

Brad D. Smith
President
Marshall University
president@marshall.edu

KEYWORDS

Leadership, Academia

Many have asked about my philosophy of leadership and creating positive change in an organization. At times, the question has been more direct – “how can a Silicon Valley CEO successfully segue into the presidency of a university?”

Since childhood, I’ve been enamored by those who seemed to run toward danger, guide others to safety or success, and deflect any accolades that came their way. [As a boy](#), that was my definition of leadership. Over the years, many articles, books, and presentations have been published that seek to define and decode the essence of successful leadership. While their numbers surpass my ability to read or listen to them all, I will confess that I’ve devoted a significant portion of my life to doing so.

Fast forward a handful of decades and my [views on leadership](#) have evolved. The progression of my thinking has come as the result of continued study of those around me, complemented by my own successes and setbacks through a variety of leadership roles across multiple industries, companies, and socio-economic market conditions.

At its core, I believe the most fitting definition of

leadership is **“the ability to inspire others to achieve shared objectives.”** While simple in its articulation, every word is carefully chosen, revealing the intricacies of what it takes to be an effective leader.

Allow me to unpack why I personally find this to be the most revealing definition of leadership, and to share a framework I strive to apply to bring this definition to life in my daily practices. Let’s begin by deconstructing **“the ability to inspire others to achieve shared objectives,”** citing definitions of key words found in Oxford Languages:

- **ABILITY:** is a talent, skill, or proficiency that can be *learned, developed, or strengthened*. I do not believe in the Trait Theory that suggests leaders are “born, not made.” On the contrary, I believe leadership is a journey, not a destination, and grows stronger with personal authenticity, practice, setbacks, and adaptation.
- **INSPIRE:** is to *animate* and fill with the *urge or ability* to do. Leadership requires an ability to inspire the head, the heart, and the hands. To paraphrase President John F. Kennedy’s speechwriter, Ted Sorenson, a leader must be more than a great communicator; they must be a



translator of dreams.

- **OTHERS:** declares the focus of a leader's energy in service to others. The must nurture and grow others' *individual abilities*, while harnessing and transforming the collection of individuals' abilities into *organizational capability*.
- **ACHIEVE:** is to successfully bring about or *reach a goal through effort, skill, or courage*. It is a combination of perspiration, practice, and the capacity to confront grand challenges.
- **SHARED OBJECTIVES:** implies the measure of one's success or failure is in service to *a cause greater than self*. This is the "skeleton key" of leadership, unlocking the collective potential of the team. At the same time, it is often the most challenging aspect of leadership because it requires convincing others to subordinate their self-interest for the greater good of the team. This is why so many leaders quote the wisdom of winning coaches with such phrases as - "it's the name on the front of the jersey that matters most, not the one on the back" (Joe Paterno), or my personal favorite - "a player who makes the team great is more valuable than a great player" (John Wooden).

Putting it together, I have come to believe the essence of great leadership is embodied in the elements of this definition, with every word requiring focus and application.

So, my answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article is that leadership is not industry-specific; it is people-specific. We are all in the people business, and life is a team sport. After three decades of leading different organizations with employees from many different cultures and countries, I have developed what I believe is an effective framework for creating positive change in any organization: The Five Ps.

These Five Ps (or principles) of leadership include potential, purpose, people, a playbook, and the commitment to pay it forward. In short, to be a successful leader in any domain, one must unleash the potential in others, align the collective through a shared purpose, select the right people to build a diverse and inclusive team, create and execute a playbook, and recognize that success is measured long after you are gone, leaving it better for the

next generation by paying it forward. These five ingredients are the recipe for leadership success, regardless of the sector of operation, and I believe that they are equally applicable in academia.

Shortly before taking the helm of my alma mater and for a few months thereafter, I met with more than a dozen university presidents and other higher education leaders to benefit from their wisdom and experience. My goal was to learn about the current landscape of higher education. Their input proved vital as our team began the work of developing the playbook for the next chapter of greatness at Marshall University. Their input has also assisted me with tailoring my own leadership skills to those who are experienced in higher education.

What has been learned about the "business of higher education" is not surprising. Suffice it to say that change, and I'm talking about transformational change, is happening in higher education.

In this 21st-century world, massive dislocation and the need for reinvention surround us. In the business world, 52 percent of companies that were listed on the Fortune 500 in the year 2000 are no longer on the list, in most cases because they no longer exist. Institutions of higher learning are not immune; they are being shaped and disrupted by new technology, innovative alternatives, and challenges with affordability. Scholars such as the late Dr. Clay Christensen predicted in 2017 that as many as 50 percent of our nation's colleges and universities could close or go bankrupt in the next 10-15 years.

We must and we will adapt. If there's one thing the COVID-19 pandemic taught us, it's that we must be incredibly agile and flexible. It also showed that we are capable of doing so when we align on a shared purpose and work together.

As the university evolves and grows to meet the needs of the 21st century, Marshall must deliver in-demand knowledge through on-demand modalities, while choosing where we will be distinctive. Simply put, we will create educational programs that are market-driven and future-focused, delivered via convenient, contemporary channels that students increasingly expect, and develop signature programs that are known for their distinctive



achievement. Marshall will preserve what makes us special by building on our historical foundation while continuing to adapt and innovate.

We have work to do, but there is tremendous pride in Marshall's vision "to inspire learning and creativity that ignites the mind, nurtures the spirit, and fulfills the promise for a better future."

Michaelangelo once said that success is seldom limited when we aim too high and miss, but rather when we aim too low and achieve our goal. Let's dream big and put a dent in the universe together!

