

# The Virtue of Leadership

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In 1998, *Leadership for the Future: The Dental School in the University* was published, following the American Association of Dental Schools (AADS) Leadership Summit Conference in October of that year. Dental education was in a different place from where it is now when Dr. Rick Valachovic became AADS Executive Director in 1997. Six dental schools had closed between 1986 and 1993. In 1998, one of dental education's most storied schools announced its closing. The summit occurred in response to the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *Dental Education at the Crossroads: Challenges and Change*, and the need for the IOM's recommendation that dental schools must ensure their value to their parent institutions was real and visible.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of real opposition to and nervousness about the summit, this conference became a seminal event. Forty-seven of 55 dental school deans attended and brought 42 university administrators with them. As AADS evolved into the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), the summit launched the ADEA Center for Educational Policy and Research, initiated the ADEA Leadership Institute, planted the seed for the ADEA Commission on Change and Innovation in Dental Education (ADEA CCI), and introduced new dialogue about dental education's relationship to the university and other health professions. The summit may have contributed to the survival of several dental schools.

I tell the story because it illustrates the virtue of leadership in the early tenure of an association's leader. Moving forward when so many were saying stop, or pivot, took courage. Along with courage, it took perseverance to stay the course. Lastly, this summit required a special kind of wisdom—the wisdom to see the importance of this dialogue in securing leadership for the future.

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## Meaning of Virtue

I will explore two virtues that are necessary for virtuous leadership—practical wisdom and justice—but first, let us examine the meaning of virtue. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, the father of virtue ethics, defines virtue as “a state of character concerned with a choice, lying in a mean, that is, the mean that is relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man [or woman] of practical wisdom would determine it.”<sup>2</sup> Note some of the key ideas:

- *Virtue is about action*—choices we make. When one makes the same choice in the same circumstance over and over again, that choice becomes a habit. Habits that promote well-being are virtues; those that harm us are vices.
- Habits define and shape character. *When we make a choice, when we act, we are not just doing something; we are becoming someone.* We know now from neuroscience what Aristotle could only surmise: habits—virtues and vices—become hardwired in our brains.
- Life is complicated! How can one know what choice to make? Knowing the right action to take requires *practical wisdom*—or what is sometimes called prudence. The Greek term is *phronesis*.
- More specifically, if we want to know the right action to take, we should do what the *person of practical wisdom* would do.

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## Wisdom

Aristotle establishes ethics not on the basis of rules, but on a person—a person or persons of

practical wisdom. These moral exemplars teach us by example the right action to take. The virtuous leader is an exemplar of practical wisdom, a role model showing us what we ought and ought not do.

Leadership, like any human endeavor, aims at some end—a good or a goal. Leaders must know which goals to pursue and what means to employ to achieve them. In watching and learning from a virtuous leader, I have observed three leadership practices associated with practical wisdom.

**1. The virtuous leader has a bias for action.** When someone asked the late Herb Kelleher, founder of Southwest Airlines, about the company's strategic plan, he replied: "We have a strategic plan. It's called doing things." ADEA has moved nimbly over the past two decades because of leadership that balanced the need for information-gathering and consensus-building with the reality that one must act deliberately or miss the opportunity. Practical wisdom involves a cycle of learning: we act, we assess, and we act again.

**2. If you want to become wise, surround yourself with sages.** Knowing you do not know, learning continuously, cultivating a sense of curiosity, and engaging with others who bring different experiences and insights are the fountains of practical wisdom. ADEA's success has come from a leader who listened and learned from the Board of Directors, staff, and exemplars in other fields, as well as from sages who now speak only from printed pages.

We know leaders must have vision and passion. As an analogy, I relate a brief story about Johann Sebastian Bach. One of the greatest composers in history, Bach produced over 300 cantatas during his lifetime. Today, if composers write a couple of cantatas in a year, they are considered prolific. At the end of many of his manuscripts, even secular compositions, Bach penned the words *solo deo gloria* (or sometimes simply "s.d.g."): "To the singular glory of God." The point is not a theological one. It is simply this: Bach did not have a vocation; he had a calling.

**3. Achieving the audacious requires melding wisdom with passion, creating a sense of purpose tantamount to a life's calling.** That calling is almost like religious zeal—the constructive kind. This is a third practice that I have observed in a virtuous leader. ADEA has benefited from single-minded leadership inspired to raise ADEA's national and global presence as The Voice of Dental Education.

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## Justice

As the author of a book on virtuous leadership, I am often approached by people who say to me, "So and so is a leader, and he, or she, isn't virtuous." My response is always the same: *not all leadership is virtuous leadership.*

Practical wisdom, or prudence, is one of the four cardinal virtues, along with courage, temperance, and justice. "Cardinal" derives from the Latin term *cardo*, which means hinge. These four virtues are the hinges on which swings the whole of a good life. I suggest to you that justice is an essential hinge of virtuous leadership.

Justice is the "outward-looking virtue." A person can be courageous or wise in respect to himself or herself, but justice has meaning only in respect to others. Justice is about how one relates to others. I will narrow our assessment of justice to two specific perspectives.

First, fairness. Justice as fairness is related to what James MacGregor Burns called transactional leadership.<sup>3</sup> The leader and follower exchange (transact) valued things—for example, money for work or recognition for achievement. Fairness, as a transaction, is a two-way street: people in the organization have a right to expect fair treatment from their leaders, and leaders have a right to expect fairness in the behaviors from those they lead. Knowing what constitutes fairness requires practical wisdom.

Justice as fairness is a minimum standard. While leaders sometimes claim to be "more than fair," anything less than fair is unjust. Virtuous leaders go beyond the minimum (fairness) to what I call *thriving*. If we believe that humans have a right to achieve their potential, then justice requires the leader to establish and sustain an environment and culture to support human achievement. The virtuous leader does this by creating opportunities for followers to grow and achieve as they contribute to the organization's goals. In his research on what motivates us at work, Daniel Pink found that what matters most to motivation is 1) autonomy (having the freedom to create and contribute), 2) mastery (getting better at what one does), and 3) purpose (knowing that what one does matters).<sup>4</sup> These are elements of thriving, of transformational leadership.

In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership engages people in a higher purpose, vision, values, and commitments that are

shared. Virtuous leaders transform others by helping others achieve their human potential. Virtuous leaders bring hope. I have observed three important practices associated with the virtue of justice.

**1. The virtuous leader creates purpose-driven organizations.** In 2002, I worked with the ADEA President's Commission on Academic Dentistry's Role in Providing Access to Care. One of the key premises of the final report was that "Health care, and by implication, oral health care, should be treated differently than marketplace commodities. . . . oral health is a part of general health. Health is . . . vital to human flourishing and basic to the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness" (p. 565).<sup>5</sup> Seventeen years later, this festschrift continues to underscore that the ultimate purpose of ADEA is the well-being—the thriving—of individuals and communities through health. I noticed this idea reflected in ADEA's new vision statement.

**2. Human potential is actualized through learning and development.** Academic dental institutions accept students who have the potential to become health providers. Through learning and development, this potential is actualized. Graduates leave not only with new skills, but, if the educational process is successful, the attitudes and values of a health professional. Their characters are transformed.

The year 1997 marked an acceleration in ADEA's efforts to actualize human potential through faculty development. More than 20 years later, thousands of faculty members have become better educators and leaders because of the Association's efforts. Nearly one-third of dental school deans are alumni of the ADEA Leadership Institute. The origin of these efforts is a virtuous leader's sense of justice: learning and development are not simply an association service, but a moral obligation, a duty, to help members actualize their potential as educators and leaders.

As I think about a third practice of justice, I will relate a personal story. In 1998, the Association retained me to conduct a search for an Associate Executive Director of Educational Policy and Research. Rick and I were reviewing the job description over dinner one evening. Maybe introverts like me should not think out loud, but I muttered, "I could do this." To which Rick responded, "Why don't you?" And that, in brief, is how I came to stand here this morning and leads me to the third habit associated with justice as thriving.

**3. The virtuous leader makes opportunities for others.** I was given an opportunity. After seven years at ADEA, I left the Association, but Rick has continued to create opportunities. There are many people here this morning for whom he opened doors for career advancement and whose impact on the world is largely due to his creating opportunities, making connections, and, importantly, serving as a mentor and advisor along the way. Back to thriving, these gifts of opportunity are *pro bono*; that is, for good or for the sake of the greater good.

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## Conclusion

Practical wisdom and justice are two essential hinges on which virtuous leadership swings. These hinges are fixed firmly by six associated habits. They all say that leadership is not about the leader, but rather about the thriving of others.

Last year I had the privilege of retreating to the Arizona desert with a group of retired dental deans and other dental education leaders. Rick was a part of that group. We spent most of a day discussing an essay by Seneca, the Roman Stoic, called "On the Shortness of Life." I recall one of Seneca's observations: "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were well invested."<sup>6</sup>

Rick, we are honoring your accomplishments this morning. This is *not* your memorial service! We will expect to see you at ADEA events and elsewhere for many years to come. But for now, thank you for more than two decades of well-invested time. Thank you for your example of virtuous leadership.

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