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## Leadership On The Plains: Vignettes From Nebraska

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## LEADERSHIP ON THE PLAINS: VIGNETTES FROM NEBRASKA

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Leadership is a popular topic. It is often viewed as a mechanism with which to blame someone when matters don't go their way. Others see it as just positions of power and self-promotion. Leadership to me is an essential skill that is developed by experience. Leadership is not a mathematical calculation with a correct answer nor a science with a data-driven set of principles. Leadership is a responsibility taken on to achieve an agreed-upon mission of a group. The membership and description of a mission varies with each group. Thus, leadership is not monolithic; some groups are very quiet while others are very visible. The absence of leadership will doom any group, and therefore it is essential to the success of any organized group. Those groups may be a country, a university, a service club, a church, a family, or a whole host of other groups.

Leadership isn't a trait possessed by only those who have lived a number of years or endured intense events. Clearly, there is no book or video that can convey the magic skill of effective leadership. It is achieved only by preparation and thoughtful communication. Many people believe leadership happens because of titles or elections. The mere fact that one is bestowed a title doesn't give them leadership skills or even effective insight on how to achieve the desired outcomes. The underlying principle is understanding the need of the group to be led.

Leadership has a few key elements that you must learn before you lead. Process is essential to good leadership. If you don't understand the processes of the institution, organization, or group you will never be sensitive to the constituencies that you lead. Second, you must understand what motivates people and how they view themselves as part of the group. Many people want to be part of the process, but few want to be responsible for the decisions that need to be made. Merely sending commands to people will never gain buy-in to the process or ultimately the commitment to any leadership decisions. Finally, you must develop the ability to see the mission of a group from a broad and long-term perspective. Once you develop that ability, you will be able to create processes, approaches, and solutions that have broad, long-term impacts. In the political setting it is called thinking one level up. If a city councilwoman can think not just about her community, but think like a state senator, she will represent several communities, and she will think in broader terms. The same is true for a state senator who can think like a governor and consider not one district, but several. If that same governor can put the state issues into the perspective of a member of Congress, she will have a broader view of how to approach problems and seek solutions.

The long-term view is developed by a keen interest in history, and by understanding why things are the way they are. Knowing the history of how something was achieved before, and what motivated people to make a change, gives great insight into consideration of what must change now. You must appreciate "why things exist before you change them."

Leadership is all about how to make things happen, how to motivate people to do more than they thought possible, and to discover how to remove impediments to allow people to act. It is about developing a process that people will accept and allow changes to be made. There appear to be several common traits to effective leadership in Nebraska: humility, passion, devotion to the group, a fair process, a disregard for partisan politics, the ability to not speak poorly of someone or hold a grudge and, finally, a firm belief that education is the key to improving everyone in the group. The interest in supporting group members is often seen in the way a leader develops the qualities of other people and improves their skills. The ability to teach others to lead, incorporating a knowledge of history and experience, is the secret to perpetuating leadership. People learn to trust the leadership of those who have had an effective leader as a role model.

Four examples of leadership, all of which I believe reflect effective leadership, follow. Each is a story of a Nebraska leader in a different setting. Together they depict how leadership shapes our world.

### **JEROME WARNER**

The legendary state senator Jerome Warner was the longest serving Nebraska legislator at the time of his death in 1997. Jerry grew up in a home where his father, Charles Warner, was known as the “Grand Old Man of Nebraska Politics.” Jerry served thirty-five years in the Unicameral and became known as the “Dean of the Legislature.” As a young boy, he was exposed to important discussions that took place in their kitchen with various state leaders. He attended many meetings and gatherings with his father, always watching how Charles handled himself (Berens, 1997, 23). Jerry observed and learned how to deal with people who opposed his father and had different ideas. Charles was a master of large state issues and broad, long-term solutions. Even though young Jerry may not fully have understood all he heard at the time, he learned how to deal with difficult situations and people. The crucial key was to study the issues and view them from all sides. Charles’ lesson to Jerry was that If you don’t know every side of an issue, go and find them (Berens, 1997). Seek out the other views. (A far cry from today’s political view: my side is right and yours is wrong.) Jerry learned that listening carefully was difficult but essential, and that it was much better to be quiet and absorb the different points of view. He didn’t develop talking points to show his point of view or to demonstrate how smart he was.

Jerry’s final preparation item to successful legislative service was to never hold a grudge. “What is done is done” was the guiding principle (Berens, 1997, 23). There was no vision of going to war with people who oppose you. For Jerry, it wasn’t us against them because “they are still us.” Everyone is still a Nebraskan. He often remarked that too many politicians had the idea that revenge, intimidation, and threats worked to advance their causes, but in Jerry’s eyes, those politicians’ only interest was their own. Those policy makers would take ethical shortcuts or cheap shots at good and decent state activities in an effort to gain short term political advantage. Roads, prisons, judges, taxation, and higher education were easy targets for the politically expedient. These state institutions had no natural champions yet happened to be the essential services of a state that needed a long-term view and solutions. For years, Jerry carried a note left for him by Charles. That note said, “You never build yourself up by tearing others down” (Berens, 1997, 77). It was an enduring trait of Jerry’s legislative leadership.

Jerry Warner's leadership titles and responsibilities included chair of the Education and Revenue committees as well as the Legislature's Executive Board, and he served as Speaker of the Unicameral. But it was his service as chair of the Appropriations Committee for fourteen years that showcased his legislative leadership. Jerry dramatically changed the way Nebraska budgeted its funds and managed the state's finances. He promoted a long-term view of the state's needs; he established processes that forced legislators to consider and vote for long-term priorities rather than short-term wants; and he was skillful at putting all priorities into one package rather than separating them into a series of individual ideas and choices.

Jerry's strongest leadership asset was his commitment to process. His view was that if people were given enough time and information, they usually do the right thing. And the way to give them that time and information was to create a process that promoted learning and understanding all sides of an issue. Often this process slowed decision-making, but his theory worked on scores of issues. He believed that if people perceived the process to be fair then, in turn, the result of the process would be fair.

On his first day at the Legislature, family friends gave Jerry a piece of paper that he kept in his billfold until it disintegrated. It was a quote by Edmund Burke, Irish statesman and member of the British Parliament in the 1700s. "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment, and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinions" (Berens, 1997, 34). Jerry was a leader because people knew his decisions were based on a sound process uncolored by political influence or immediate popularity. He was trusted as having the state's best interest in mind rather than his own personal gain. He never ran for higher office because of his dislike for partisan politics and making promises to people before knowing what the issues really were or how to solve them.

### NORBERT TIEMANN

In 1966, the citizens of Nebraska, through the ballot box, created a tax crisis of historic proportion. A referendum led by Omaha business interests repealed an income tax law that was scheduled to go into effect on January 1, 1967 (Luebke, 1990). Another initiative, sponsored by the Nebraska Farm Bureau, would amend the Nebraska constitution prohibiting the state government from levying a property tax. Both measures were approved, leaving the state little or no tax base with which to pay its bills. It was a crisis so severe that extraordinary measures normally considered unimaginable became possible.

The same election put a young businessman named Norbert "Nobby" Tiemann into the Governor's office. He promised to bring a business-like approach to state government. Prior to his election, Tiemann was a small-town banker involved in community affairs; he served as mayor for three terms; and he organized a series of regional meetings with bankers and others interested in the state's problems. Those meetings helped him gain a state-wide perspective and an understanding of Nebraska's needs.

Tiemann stressed investment in future returns. He argued that state aid to schools, adequate financing for higher education, economic development, and highway improvements would yield dividends to citizens as well as businesses (Berens, 1997, 50). His election plan was to not attack his opponent, incumbent Nebraska Lieutenant Governor Phillip Sorensen, but to speak about the need to be fair and equitable. He also surrounded himself with bright and savvy advisors. Known as the “Whiz Kids,” each was assigned a specific issue for study and recommendations. Nobby Tiemann and his “Whiz Kids” executed a modern and effective campaign. They won, and at the same election inherited the tax crisis.

Traditionally, Nebraska governors have not exercised their political power to influence the legislature. They have chosen to limit themselves to their administrative role, leaving policy issues to the legislature. Tiemann ignored that tradition and aggressively began to draft a new revenue act that combined a sales tax with an income tax. He consulted and worked with the three most influential state legislators to make sure the legislation had champions.

Early on, Governor Tiemann pledged his cooperation with the Legislature. He personally attended the open hearings of the Revenue Committee and actively participated in public discussions. (Of course, this meant he had to compromise to get the bills out of committee.) He used the legislative process to preach the need for a balanced and equitable tax system, and he emphasized that Nebraska needed a system that was flexible and could adjust to changing conditions in the years to come. This could not be just a short-term fix.

With the assistance of the original three legislators, bills favorable to Omaha were advanced and passed into law. Ideas like merging the Municipal University of Omaha with the University of Nebraska, state aid to junior colleges, the repeal of two head taxes, and a bill to reimburse county and local governments for losses in revenue brought the needed votes for the revenue package (Luebke, 1990). Once sales and income taxes were put into place, the state was able to distribute aid back to the needy school districts helping to reduce the need for local property tax. This combination of bills led Tiemann to declare these bills as “the most significant legislation in the 100-year history of the state” (Luebke, 1990).

Late in the session Nobby took action on another issue that has had enduring significance. The state roads were in need of repair, and the construction of the national Interstate Highway System required Nebraska to cost-share the project. The problem was that, ever since 1875, the state had a constitutional limit to restrict indebtedness to \$100,000. It proved to be a fiscal disaster. Unwilling or unable to tax themselves sufficiently to produce the cash needed for construction, the legislature found it would save money to borrow rather than fund projects as revenue became available. That is, the interest rate would be lower than the cost of inflation over time.

Tiemann proposed a solution to issue revenue bonds and start construction immediately. He sought money through a motor vehicle or fuel tax to repay the bonds. Forty-six states had some form of credit financing for highways. This change required a constitutional amendment. Tiemann led the compromise to keep the debt limit but authorize a provision that allowed the legislature to authorize bonds backed by motor vehicle license fees and fuel tax for highway construction. The measure was placed on the 1968 ballot and was narrowly approved.

Tiemann and the centennial legislature accomplished a great deal more in that historic session. A department of Economic Development was created, a state personnel office was created, and the Nebraska Investment Council with a state investment officer was established. A fair housing law, improvement in state mental health facilities, and a proposed amendment to the constitution to lower the voting age to nineteen was passed. In 1967 a state record total of 632 bills were passed into law (Luebke, 1990). Many of those bills were far-reaching and long-lasting. The credit for being the driving force was Norbert Tiemann. He was the first governor elected for a four-year term, and that allowed him to be progressive and take risks.

Nobby was ultimately defeated for a second term, but his leadership style was just what Nebraska needed in 1967. He learned to listen to the citizens, developed policies with broad considerations, honored his pledge to bring a business-like approach to state government, and focused on long-term solutions with new ideas. He utilized his staff's expertise and trusted them to develop sound policy. "Governor Tiemann dragged his state 'kicking and screaming into the twentieth century' ... Nationally syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak repeated the remark and observed further that 'Tiemann has attempted and largely succeeded in pulling Nebraska out of the political Stone Age' (Luebke, 1990). As Allen Beermann—Nebraska's Secretary of State for twenty-four years — said, "Nebraska without Governor Tiemann would be a hugely different place today. He was a great leader for our state at the right time, a very forward-thinking person who never let politics get in the way of what he perceived needed to be done" (Walton, 2012). Nebraska historian Frederick Luebke has described the Tiemann years as "gubernatorial leadership that was unprecedented in its activist or dynamic qualities" (Walton, 2012).

### PETER LONGO

Leadership doesn't require an elected title. Peter Longo, PhD, a long-time faculty member at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, is a good example. Dr. Longo, the youngest of nine children, grew up in Omaha, Nebraska. His humble demeanor makes him an easy person to approach and interact with on a wide variety of topics. His parents instilled in him a work ethic and a sense of right and wrong. It was their belief in education that Peter adopted and has been utilizing more than forty years.

At the age of sixteen, he learned leadership qualities that came from an unusual source. While serving as head umpire for the Bellevue Little League, Peter discovered that just being the person in charge was not effective for the broad view of the little leaguers. Yes, someone had to call balls and strikes and make decisions of fact. It was a very necessary function, but there was so much more to be accomplished. He discovered the effectiveness of teaching kids how to hold a bat and how to throw the ball. His approach became that of an instructor, not the customary commands of umpire. Instead of letting players struggle, he went beyond his duties as umpire and took on the broader role of an educator. Baseball was his introduction to working with people. He understood that if these young athletes mastered baseball skills, they would experience more enjoyment and would be motivated to take on other unfamiliar activities. This success in working with people led him into the world of higher education.

After securing his law degree, Peter earned his PhD and found his calling in working with students in academia. He found that if he listened, he was able to understand not only his students, but his

colleagues, as well. By learning the needs of students—as opposed to telling the students what they need to know—he is better able to advocate for their needs.

Peter's greatest strength is his devotion to students and their success. It is this devotion that fuels his passion for engaging students and pushing them, in turn, to engage their own communities. He has championed hands-on experiential learning as a way of expanding a student's potential. A profound part of his belief in the process of learning is that life is not lived from chapters of a book, but rather in the experience of human interaction and real-life problem solving. For Peter, the process of learning also includes taking chances with new ideas and approaches to understanding. He has often declared, "My students are way smarter than I am... I learn so much from listening and working with them." This devotion to students has made him intensely loyal to the institution of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Peter learned early that the process and the focus on student needs are far more important than any one person's place in the University.

He learned before he led. The sense of right and wrong was strengthened by his mentors Father John Schlegel, president of Creighton University from 2000 to 2011, and Professor Robert Miewald, professor of Political Science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln from 1971 to 2006. They gave him strong messages. Father Schlegel taught Peter to have the confidence to make a decision. Don't worry about being wrong as long as you "do right for students before yourself." Miewald, in particular, was loud and clear: "Your responsibility is to take charge; however, don't be a jerk, and be nice to everyone." He also encouraged Peter to take on duties that are not required. It was a lesson to listen and see where there is a need to act, and then jump in and make a difference. And he advised Peter not to take credit; just work and your reward is that the system, the community, or the institution is a better place because you became involved.

Peter, as an active scholar of the Nebraska Constitution, was called upon by Governor Ben Nelson to use his expertise in 1995. Peter was appointed to the Nebraska Constitutional Revision Commission, a two-year review to modernize the Nebraska Constitution. He and his mentor Bob Miewald had just written the definitive reference book on the Constitution of Nebraska. Peter was a vital member of the commission and participated passionately. His lack of partisan political views served him well. He was viewed as having an unwavering sense of what Nebraskans needed in their constitution rather than what was politically advantageous for one group or another. The result was several recommendations for change, many of which were approved by the citizens. It was a classic example of engaging in the state's best interest from a broad and long-term view.

Peter also takes on duties inside the University of Nebraska at Kearney when the need is great. Often an interim appointment in administration is a result of immediate need and the desire for stability. Interim administrators inherit problems, and these are often accompanied by a degree of dysfunction within the unit. Peter has been the consummate interim or, to invoke his baseball days, the consummate "utility infielder." His calm and approachable manner has brought stability many times. Peter served as the interim Dean of Student Life, as Interim Dean of the College of Natural and Social Sciences for two years, and as the interim inaugural Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He was also interim Honors Director, Chair of the Department of Criminal Justice, and Director of Undergraduate Research. When there is a need, Peter doesn't worry about taking credit. He steps up and works to make the institution a better place for students.

What really fuels Peter is his devotion to the institution, and that devotion creates leadership by example. He is not motivated by future gain, but rather he has a humble approach to do what is needed for the benefit of the institution. Another of his assets is the ability to embrace new ideas. The new ideas can be in pedagogy or in the approach to recruiting students. He is widely viewed as progressive because of his nature to not be averse to new concepts. His service on the constitutional revision commission demonstrated an ability to explore new approaches to our state's constitution. The same has been true about his service on scores of committees at the university, community, and state levels.

Peter has educated literally thousands of young leaders because he possesses an uncommon ability to pass on the elements of leadership: engagement to learn before leading, do more than what is required, and become involved for the betterment of the community or institution rather than for self-promotion. He has always stepped up and acted when needed.

Peter gives freedom to his colleagues and treats students like equals. He values their opinions and their judgment, not only in terms of academic coursework but in terms of life. He conveys an intense desire to have students engage with their communities, and he is all about motivating students to perform their best and to give back. He understands that each student has a different gear, a different way of being motivated. A servant leader, Peter treats students as if they were part of his family, he is dedicated to serving and supporting the university, he is always a source of energy, and he's always on the move. It is not in his nature to sit back and watch events unfold.

#### MARY LOU KRISTENSEN

Leaders do not always come from institutions or elected office. Many leaders can be found in one's family. I consider the family to be a group that needs leadership. These leaders often go unnoticed but actually have a lasting impact. Leadership in this setting does not require a letterhead or a written roadmap. Mary Lou Kristensen (yes, Mary Lou is my mother) was a very effective leader. She shied away from publicity although she raised a family in somewhat of a public light. She was passionate about education and learning. As a high school graduate, Mary Lou had a great interest in a brand new career as an airline stewardess, but this interest was suppressed when her parents told her she could either be a teacher or get married. She chose to do both. She became a one room schoolteacher at the age of seventeen, went on to graduate from college, and eventually got a Master's Degree in Library Science. A farmer's wife and middle school teacher is not typically viewed as a leader, but Mary Lou's example shows that leaders are all around us.

Mary Lou exercised many of the traits of a recognized leader. She was passionate about her sons learning to read at an early age. To her, reading was the foundation of learning. She drove her sons to read for fun, but also to read a wide variety of topics – which is a variation of learning before leading. She supported her family's farming operation in various ways, including the raising of her children (she was a stay-at-home mother until both of her sons were ready for school) and handling the finances. When it was practical, she worked toward and obtained her master's degree. She then began to work full-time at Minden Public Schools. Her salary allowed for a steady income to keep the family afloat and provided much needed health insurance coverage.

Mary Lou's devotion focused on the success of the members of the family. She was extremely supportive of her husband in the farming profession and frequently sacrificed vacations, new household items, and social opportunities to stay home and balance the needs of the farm and providing for her family. She attended to all school-related activities whether or not her sons were involved, and she specifically took both sons to academic programs. Commencements, Honors Night, Honor Society inductions, and concerts were her favorites. She never missed a chance to speak positively about students who excelled, with the expectation that her children would pick up the subtle hint that we should strive to be like them. She had the long-term view that education was a process and a necessary ingredient in the development of the skills that would produce broad and long-term understanding. Mary Lou also pushed her sons to read newspapers every day. They provided exposure to a wide range of topics and interests. Every night she would bring home *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News* for us to read. Current events were expected to be absorbed. And although she had a keen interest in politics, she never imposed her political views on any student.

On many occasions, Mary Lou assured my brother and I that we didn't need an allowance because working for the betterment of the family farm was more important, our education was much more valuable, and they would find a way to provide for as much higher education as we wanted. It was the team spirit she promoted: everyone helped with the duties of the farm, especially during the busy irrigation season, and she was part of that team. It was not uncommon to see her helping with irrigation work or driving the truck. She was the family spiritual driving force as well, and also the organizer of all family events. Mary Lou went out of her way to host family gatherings to make sure that they occurred. She believed it was important to have regular family gatherings in which everyone participated, and she enjoyed maintaining holiday traditions. Hers was a vision that family success didn't happen in a vacuum. It required work to plan, prepare, and execute. She never missed a chance to gather the family to celebrate birthdays, holidays, graduations, confirmations, and more.

At school, Mary Lou treated every student with respect and a friendly smile. Even the most annoying student was greeted warmly and welcomed into the library where she was the only librarian. Always polite, she took a great interest in every student. During the summer she would order new books for the library – and she would read every one of those books so she could get a feel of who might like or benefit from that book. Mary Lou would memorize the name of each incoming freshman so when she met them on the first day of school, she could put a name with a face. Her goal was to get students excited about reading — reading anything — so they could increase their skills and hopefully go on to higher education. She never held a grudge against any student who misbehaved; instead she would move on and try to find another way to connect with that student. Always calm and never one to react harshly, it was Mary Lou's leadership style to motivate students to find their passion. In her library, there was never a student who was told to be quiet and just go sit in their chair. She would find something interesting for them to read, which was her way of helping students improve even if they didn't realize it.

Mary Lou never stopped learning. Later in life, well into her late seventies and early eighties, she learned to use a computer. It was a challenge, but she did it, and she put it to good use. She discovered yet another interest while taking a senior college class in genealogy. She began to write a family history and later self-published a book of the family story on both sides. It was her long-term view that someday one of the children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren would take an

interest in that story. She wrote a very detailed account of the things she held most dear, and that was the family. Hers was a very long-term view of what was of lasting importance, the long-term view of a family—to keep it together in the present and to prepare it for the future through education.

Through bad times—which all families have--she maintained an optimistic and cheery outlook. Her philosophy was to improve by learning and always respect the institutions to which she was so devoted: family and lifelong education.

These are four examples of leadership. I was influenced and I learned from all of them. Each had a different approach, and each led in a very different setting from the others. Leaders are not effective just because of a title or the position they hold. Leadership is acquired by preparation, experience, and the ability to see the long-term view. Warner, Tiemann, Longo, and Kristensen all understood the importance of learning the needs of their group before they could effectively lead. All four had a quiet, reserved approach to listening and to understanding all sides of an issue. When action was needed, each had the ability to execute a process which yielded a desired outcome. They developed the ability to learn about their constituencies and how to motivate them to improve. The power of education was also important to each, as well as the ability to not criticize others. None led with loud commands, but rather by helping people work. The ability to acknowledge the impact of politics, and the ability to exclude partisan politics from long-term policy decisions, requires good discipline. Each leader was calm, and none of the four lost sight of the big picture. In particular, Kristensen, Longo, and Warner valued the improvement of young people as the vital key to long-term success. This is the essence of effective leadership.

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