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Leadership Lessons From a University President

It is rare when a leader eloquently writes about the hard truths of successful leadership. Leadership is not just about expertise or experience. It takes so much more to be transformational. In *Leading Matters*,¹ John Hennessy from Stanford University shares with candor what he learned on his leadership journey. He is considered to be one of the great university presidents, and most would say that he made it look easy. But he is quick to say that it was not easy, and he often made mistakes.

Now retired from the top administrative role at Stanford, Hennessy's goal in writing the book is to provide guidance to the next generation of leaders, using his own stories and lessons learned. He wants to change the conversation about the nature of leadership in the 21st century. Hennessy believes that leadership is, above all, a journey. He discusses the pivotal roles that humility, authenticity, service, empathy, collaboration, innovation, intellectual curiosity, storytelling, and a focus on legacy have all played in his leadership career.

With more than 15 years in his high-profile and complex role, Hennessy discusses his many lessons learned. The following are especially applicable in nurse leader roles today.

ON LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Hennessy's book includes a reading list of 153 nonfiction books that he has read that have influenced his thinking about leadership. He is a believer in reading the stories of great leaders to understand what characteristics helped to make them successful. He is interested in how they prepared themselves for moments of crisis, to learn how they handled success, and most importantly, managed their failures. He questions why anyone would not want to benefit from the experiences of others. History may not always repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

ON MAKING HARD CHOICES

Organizational leaders often face hard choices. Sometimes the events are outside your organization such as a natural disaster or tragedy. Internal events may also require courage to take risks, admit mistakes, or recover from failure. When

faced with hard choices, Hennessy contends that leaders must also remember the core mission of their organization. There are times when the community needs you, and you need to step up. But as a leader, you also need the courage to stand firm in the face of demands, and not to be afraid to take risks and sometimes say no.

ON LEADERSHIP AS SERVICE

Hennessy is a believer in the servant leader mindset. Leaders should always remember that it is their staff who do the heavy lifting. The role of the leader is to help them to be as productive and effective as they can be. Many leaders fail because they focus too much on their gains, and not enough on the institution and staff that they serve. Humility comes with the understanding that you are not alone in your leadership. Everyone in the organization has a role to play.

One of the challenges that leaders face is how to use their time productively. High-profile leaders receive many requests from outside organizations to sit on boards, chair task forces, or attend community events. When assessing these opportunities, Hennessy first evaluated his institutional responsibilities and then asked the following 3 questions:

1. How important is the service or institution being served?
2. Can I contribute in an impactful way or could others easily provide the service?
3. Will the service opportunity contribute to my growth and learning?

ON ASKING FOR MONEY

Philanthropy is a crucial responsibility for many executive leaders in nonprofit organizations. Hennessy clearly understood that a major part of his role was to ask for donations. It can be challenging to raise money even at a well-respected institution like Stanford with wealthy alumni. He learned that a personal relationship was critical to establish the trust that most donors need to feel before they donate. He recommends that leaders should take the time to learn what matters most to the prospective donor and to his/her family before they ask for

a gift. He learned through experience that a “no” should only mean not right now. He was often surprised at donations that were made many years after an initial request.

ON STORYTELLING

Through his years as a leader, Hennessy learned that although facts and figures can capture the brain; they rarely win the heart. Great leaders are storytellers who find the compelling stories in their organizations, especially those that are transformative. Although a new proposal

may seem logical, that alone will not energize others. The best way to move visions forward is turning the dream into a story that enlists the help of others.

As I read about Hennessy’s leadership lessons learned, I was struck by how similar his challenges were to those faced by executive nurse leaders today. In conclusion, he writes that legacy means ensuring that others have benefited from the work you have done. With this book, his leadership legacy will extend well beyond Stanford.

Reference

1. Hennessy JL. *Leading Matters: Lessons From My Journey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books; 2018.

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