Paths to Leadership

Welcome to the inaugural edition of Paths to Leadership, where established leaders offer their experience, wisdom and guidance, specifically for early career professionals. As this is the first in an ongoing series, it seems appropriate to provide some of the ‘backstory’ for the series and the series title, both of which come from our first featured author, Lori Goodwin, who is currently pursuing an MS in Accounting/MBA dual degree here at UT Dallas.

As Lori and many aspiring leaders before her have experienced, a satisfactory answer to the simple question ‘What is leadership?’ often remains out of reach. A critical and first insight of leadership, however, as Lori describes below, is that this may not be the best question to be asking. Because the answer will be different for every leader, and more importantly, because leadership is less about **finding** or following a path, and more about **creating** that path in the first place. The series title, Paths to Leadership, emerges from the idea that there are as many trails out there as there are leaders willing to take on the challenge of blazing them. The series is a forum for capturing and sharing the insights of experienced leaders and their paths, in order to help early career professionals in creating their own. We hope you enjoy this first installment, and welcome your contribution to the series as well.

Jerry Hoag  
Executive Director  

Jeff Hicks  
Academic Director  

The Leadership Center at UTD

The Path to Leadership? Stay Curious, My Friends  
An Interview with Pat Priest, COO / CFO of Dallas Regional Chamber  

*by Lori Goodwin*

As graduate students at a nationally ranked business school in the heart of one of the nation’s most vibrant economies, we are driven by the pressure to lead and fueled by c-suite dreams. Our LinkedIn accounts are flooded with articles telling us “12 Things Every Leader Must do Every Day” or “10 Things an Effective Leader Never Says.” The plethora of essential, at times contradictory, commandments of leadership can be overwhelming, yet leadership remains elusive, chased by many, caught by few. And we, as young professionals, are still left pondering the question, “What is leadership?”

But perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Leadership can’t be wrapped neatly into any one article. Perhaps we should not be searching for a definitive answer to a changing question. Leadership is fluid and our expression and experience of leadership will change as we develop further in our career. Nevertheless, as young professionals, we need to continue to move forward, to take the next career step, but in what direction? How do we lead now?
Instead of reading another vaguely applicable article, let’s talk. Let’s talk to leaders, leaders of organizations, of cities, of industries. What advice would these experienced leaders give us as young professionals? What do they wish we knew? What can we learn from their experiences that will help us navigate and create our own ongoing path to leadership? Earlier this summer, I had the privilege of learning from Pat Priest, Chief Financial Officer of the Dallas Regional Chamber, who provided valuable answers and insights to all these questions and more. Having held pivotal leadership roles in multiple organizations across multiple industries, Ms. Priest has a wealth of knowledge and experience in leadership. While encapsulating her wisdom into one brief article is near impossible, there were themes that continued to emerge throughout our conversation, themes I believe to be the sign posts on the path to leadership.

Be curious, endlessly curious. The process of learning should not end with graduation or be limited to only your area of interest. Show interest in your organization as a whole. Early in her career, Ms. Priest’s curiosity led her to a project at Austin Industries with senior VPs to understand and assimilate the needs of the organization. Through this project, she was able to develop an understanding about the complexities of the organization at a level otherwise impossible. Curiosity can open doors to the great leaders in an organization. Develop an insatiable curiosity.

“There are so many things to be curious about that go so far beyond just your job description. That’s one of the things that really set an individual apart because that curiosity gets you engaged in so many different areas. Curiosity is one of the best characteristics that an individual can have early stage.” - Pat Priest

Listen and ask questions. Curiosity is asking questions. Listening is knowing how to hear the answers. Active listening is an art mastered through practice and experience. During his tenure as president at the Chamber, Ambassador Jim Oberwetter was an extraordinary listener, aiding his ability to synthesize opinions, succinctly represent the issues and build a coalition around consensus. Through listening, you discover the greatness of others and eventually yourself. When asked about finding your voice as a leader, Ms. Priest emphasized the importance of listening.

“You begin to see different people’s styles in the leadership process and those people that really have a high level of credibility and recognition and when you sit in a room and you find those thoughtful people that are really effective in guiding a thought process, it’s great to see that style and emulate that style. And I think we are all, to a large extent, copying those people that we find to be successful and endearing on a personal basis.”

Be present and engaged. Pick the areas that you want to participate in and then be a contributor and a volunteer. Be willing to put in the time and personal connection. To be a thought leader, you must first be present, be engaged, be curious and be listening. Dedicate yourself to understanding the people in the room and the individual’s perspective. It is through being continually present that the role of leadership is acquired.

“It’s that process of being present, of being curious, of being engaged and involved and participating and contributing and then you develop the respect and the recognition that gives you more of a voice...I think the main thing is that you have to put in the time to be a leader. You have to be able to say I’m going to dedicate myself to being knowledgeable, to being present, to understanding the people in the room and the individual’s perspective to be able to be in that leadership role.”
Develop strong relationships and maintain them. It is important to know how to make connections with others around you. A leader must build teams, teams often built from diverse people with diverse opinions and experience. As a leader, you must be able to connect the dots, so to speak, to draw seemingly unconnected people into one cohesive group.

“Another piece is the human side of leadership, being able to connect to people in a very deep and positive way.”

Our time at University allows us access to an incredible network of professors, career coaches, employers, and fellow students. Actively work to develop strong relationships across the organization. Nurture this network and, most importantly, maintain it after graduation. These relationships will be important in the future.

Master the art of assimilation. Assimilation is the critical thinking skill necessary to take large amounts of data, develop a cohesive vision, and reach a logical conclusion. It is a process of synthesis. We must develop mastery of the process of assimilating data, opinions, and issues. Ms. Priest identified assimilation as one of the challenges that future leaders will face.

“We’ve now got a global stage that everyone is working from. Managing data, big data, managing the vast amount of information that is coming at you at all times and being able to assimilate that and make good decisions is going to be a big issue.”

Leadership is a continuing story of curiosity and active listening. Being curious and present as well as a good listener will propel you early in your career by exposing new opportunities. Once a leadership role is achieved, effective leadership is maintained through the process of continuing curiosity and listening. Relationships are maintained through this same process of curiosity and listening. Any relationship is a continual expression of curiosity and concern. Assimilating data, a more technical skill set than relationship building, is again fueled by curiosity and listening. It is asking questions and listening for the answers.

“There’s all these different competing activities going on when you graduate. You’ve got a new job and you’ve got to figure all that out. And you’re making new friends. You’re figuring out what’s going on in your community and so really a lot of it is picking your areas that you want to participate in and then being present, being a contributor, being a volunteer, listening to the issues before taking on that role of being the thought leader. So, it takes a lot of listening and understanding and participating in activities. So, it’s a long process that never stops because I don’t think you really get to the point of being a leader without continuing to be a learner.”

To lead, stay curious, my friends.