

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Women in Leadership Series

Building Blocks for a Successful Career: My Journey

By Janet Ward

If I were to map my professional journey through higher education administration, it would not be linear but rather would feature numerous twists and turns and hills and valleys across nearly four decades. My early years were grounded in learning basic policies and practices related to admissions and records—and then financial aid, institutional research, data management, and systems within the community college sector. My initial entry point was as a program manager at a branch campus for Pierce College (WA). With no direct staff reports, my job was to manage all registration and records activities for the Puyallup branch campus. I had much to learn and found colleagues who were generous with their time and patience as they trained me. By the time I left to pursue other opportunities, I had attained the position of director of student aid and information and led multiple enrollment management departments. I worked with a significantly larger staff and led the college's transition to a new statewide student information system for community college admissions and registration.

My professional journey veered in the late 1980s into private higher education. Most of what I had learned at the community college—best practices, policy, data management, systems, and staff development—translated readily into the four-year higher education environment. My first role was as director of registration and records at Seattle Pacific University (WA), a private institution confronting multiple enrollment management challenges. At the time, the university was an open-door

institution unable to consistently meet its new student goals or reduce its high attrition rates (*i.e.* low retention and graduation rates). Its home-grown student information system (SIS) was not integrated: student records—admissions, registration, financial aid, student accounts, etc.—were held in siloed databases. The results included incomplete and poor data across systems and sub-par service to students and other constituents. One of the reasons for my coming to the university was to assess current business practices and systems and identify means of improvement. After spending six months interviewing various campus leaders and departments, I recommended the purchase of a new, integrated SIS. Subsequently, I was asked to co-lead the system selection and two-year implementation processes.

I spent the majority of my career at this institution and experienced many twists and turns. Every two to three years, new responsibilities were added to my portfolio and/or I was promoted to a new leadership position. My title changed over time from director of registration and records, to director of admissions and university registrar to university registrar (advising center and student success initiatives were added to improve retention) and then to assistant vice president for enrollment (with added responsibility for financial aid and student accounts) to associate vice president for information and data management (my final role). The associate vice president role focused more on data analysis and research for enrollment management goals that

required data management and analysis skills related to enrollment projection modeling and building tracking and assessment reports; enrollment operation oversight was removed from my portfolio and replaced with institutional research and support for academic affairs.

I pursued professional development on each campus as well as independently, which led to my being actively involved in various state, regional, and national organizations. While attendance at annual conferences helped keep me up to date on best practices and innovations, these meetings also expanded my network of colleagues who provided insights and guidance when I encountered challenging situations. In addition, I wanted to give back to my colleagues what I had learned along the way, so I became an author and an active conference presenter, held various leadership positions, and served on various committees. Each opportunity helped me become the leader I am today.

As I reflect on my career, I find that I have truly enjoyed my journey, despite challenges and disappointments. May the insights provided in this article help current and aspiring leaders navigate their futures more successfully.

Building Blocks: Observe, Learn, Innovate

Throughout my career, opportunities arose that required me to step out of my comfort zone or beyond my professional background in order to tackle something completely new. Campus leaders noted my resolve to accept new challenges; with little guidance from supervisors, it was my habit to jump into new projects and roles. As I did so, my first step was to build my understanding of the current state by taking time to learn from those most affected (students, faculty, staff, other departments, etc.). Rather than starting by making statements based on assumptions, I would ask others:

- What is not working, and why? To truly understand an issue, it is important to first understand the policy that drives the processes and communication flow. Next, it is important to understand how technology is being utilized to support the processes. Finally, it is necessary to investigate areas tied to staff

resources, including training, workload, numbers deployed to support processes, etc. Understanding the current state of policy, process, technology, and staff resources is essential for building a foundation of knowledge.

- What is needed to improve the situation? Asking stakeholders—students, faculty, and/or staff who are impacted by the problem—to help identify potential solutions will help create needed support and buy-in when changes to policy, processes, communication, and/or systems are recommended. Also, those most affected by the policy or process usually propose the best ideas for improvements.
- What will it take to solve the situation permanently rather than temporarily? This requires innovative thinking in pursuit of systemic solutions that transcends traditional boundaries. I have found it imperative for a leader to emphasize that the ultimate solution will permanently prevent similar issues from recurring. While a temporary fix may be needed in the short term, the team needs to understand that the ultimate goal is to identify and implement a holistic solution that will permanently resolve all issues stemming from the root problem.
- Demonstrating the ability to observe and learn and develop innovative solutions to existing challenges is one way to demonstrate leadership potential. As challenges are navigated successfully, greater opportunities for effecting change within the department and across the institution should follow.

Building Your Team

Another aspect of innovative leadership requires understanding what you know and don't know by recognizing your strengths and weaknesses and then gathering around you those with complementary expertise and abilities. When building your team—whether within your department or cross-functional and campus-wide—seek to involve those whose knowledge, experience, and skills complement your own. I always sought a strong advocate focused on team building and team harmony—a person who could understand the mood of the group upon entering the room. That way I could fo-

cus on organizational issues while my colleague worked to ensure team harmony and cohesion.

True innovation is rarely the result of one person working alone; rather, it is the result of a symphony of like-minded individuals focused on creating a beautiful result together. When building a team focused on innovation, seek to include those who will bring different talents and gifts, such as:

- **Section Leaders:** Those from various departments (or points along the process under review) who can contribute expertise about the negative impacts that the policy, process, system, and/or communication is having on various stakeholder groups (*e.g.*, departments, students). Delegate to the section leaders appropriate levels of authority and responsibility for specific project outcomes, and hold them accountable. To sustain energy for the work, the conductor and section leaders should take time to regularly recognize special achievements and celebrate success along the way.
- **Technical Support:** This includes central information technology staff with broad campus responsibility for systems, data management, and security as well as departmental staff focused on internal business processes and reporting. These team members can help identify possibilities not yet utilized by existing systems as well as system limitations. Both need to be known.
- **Audience:** In a student-centric service model, all policies and processes should hold up to student scrutiny. Policies, processes, and services must be effective, efficient, and easy to understand. True innovation comes when stakeholder input is sought regularly; ensure that students have a voice at the table.
- **Take Time to Refine or Re-Write the Composition:** As the leader, be sure to synthesize all of the input; with your team, determine recommendations and plans of action that will lead to desired change. Remember: Many good ideas will surface along the way; your challenge is to identify and recommend the few ideas that will drive the needed change(s) and achieve the desired outcome(s). The best recommendations will create greater clarity, achieve efficien-

cies, and increase effectiveness. Depending on the time and resources at hand, this may require that change be accomplished through an iterative process.

Leadership Attributes

Colleagues have asked me what leadership attributes are essential to progress from a role as manager or supervisor of a small department to greater responsibility within a higher education institution. While I have never had a mentor, I have used my observational skills to identify what I admired or disliked about various leadership styles. I have tried to emulate the attributes I deemed positive and to avoid the behaviors I found offensive. Each of us can learn from those around us and then choose what we wish to include in our own leadership style. For me, the common characteristics in effective leaders (some charismatic, others less so) are character and courage while being both a visionary and a problem solver.

Character and Courage Matter

Honor, integrity, and honesty are imperative characteristics of an effective leader and are utilized day in and day out during times of success as well as turmoil. Character matters, particularly in times of stress and challenge. I decided early in my career that I wanted to work with people of character and principle. During difficult times, when I found that certain leaders could not be trusted, I knew it was time to find a different path along which to continue my journey. I've changed direction several times during my career. Such transitions have rarely been pleasant, but I have always been happier after leaving an unhealthy work environment. Have courage, have confidence in yourself, and look for that new path—especially when you know in your heart that it is time to let go and move on.

I recall when a new dean was hired to be my supervisor. He was coming from another institution where colleagues had shared their observations about his leadership shortcomings. After considerable thought, I decided to take the direct approach and ask my supervisor about his leadership style and what he would need from me and my team to be successful. I then shared what

I needed from him in order for us both to be successful. This open and candid conversation led in the long run to a mutually supportive and encouraging working relationship. This open and direct approach has been successful for me, though the outcome sometimes was my choosing to find another path. My simple rule of thumb has been to work with people of character—and to have courage to start a job search and move on when the work environment could not deliver in this area.

Visionary and Problem Solver

One of the greatest compliments I received in my career was a supervisor stating that I had the rare ability to be both a strategic visionary and a highly effective problem solver (in other words, I got the job done on time and within budget, and stakeholders were happy with the results). Throughout my career, I have recognized my ability to see beyond the immediate tasks at hand and to anticipate what changes needed to occur in order to be successful in the future. I see patterns and relationships and devise or improve plans to reach stated goals, whether at the department, division, or university level. I have discovered that most of my colleagues are so absorbed with day-to-day challenges that they are unable to see what is really needed to improve policy, operations, communication, or systems in order to better serve students. When colleagues would come to me seeking advice, I would remind them to not get lost in the “forest” of day-to-day problems and tasks. Instead of trying to walk around the individual “trees” to find a solution, I would encourage them to imagine flying in a helicopter above the forest in order to find the pathway out (solve the problem). This requires carving out time even in busy schedules so that leaders can focus on long-term goals related to planning, staff development, and their own professional development. Find the time by setting aside two uninterrupted hours per week or one full day per term for planning; the key is to set aside time.

A visionary must understand not only the institution’s mission and the strategic outcomes that need to be achieved but also the best opportunities to influence them. While it is important to focus on what is hap-

pening this term and even next term, visionary leaders also must look three to five years ahead and determine what will be needed to progress toward stated institutional goals. A visionary leader will also outline steps to be taken and draft an action plan. For example, when outcomes assessment was becoming a buzzword related to the revised accreditation process, I read the literature and attended conference sessions and then developed an outcomes assessment outline for the enrollment division that was presented to my supervisor. This proved timely as our institutional accreditation process was to begin soon; because I had seen the need, the enrollment division was prepared to engage in the process.

My ability to see patterns resulted in numerous supervisors asking me to discover why a department, process (*e.g.*, delayed scholarship notification), or outcome (*e.g.*, improve retention) was failing to meet expectations. The problem solver is rarely welcomed into such situations, yet the organization is dependent on implementing a workable solution and successfully resolving the situation. When asked to take on the problem solver role, ensure from the start that you will have strong support from leadership, particularly should times get tough. The next steps are to clarify expectations of the staff and restate the institution’s desired outcomes. Most important, clearly communicate that mutual respect, honesty, and transparency are expected throughout the process.

I recall working with a highly dysfunctional staff; members of various departments admitted their distrust of—and almost open hostility toward—one another. The first time I convened this staff and was explaining what they could expect from me and what my expectations were of them, someone asked, “But what if someone does not want to change or follow your lead?” Without hesitating, I assured everyone present that I would do all I could to help each one of them be successful in the new organization; yet, the train was leaving the station, and everyone had the choice to either get on board or stay on the platform (in which case I would help them leave the organization). The staff stared at me in silence. Over time, some did leave the department, but those who remained stated later that the work environment improved significantly.

My career has been exceptional because various supervisors provided me with opportunities to expand my knowledge and challenges to test and hone my leadership and managerial abilities. My hope is that I have

helped prepare others to walk new paths, to better enjoy their journey, and to make a real difference within their organization.

About the Author



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Janet Ward is a Senior Consultant for AACRAO Consulting. Throughout her career, Ward has lead efforts to support institutional and enrollment management goal development and attainment through institutional research efforts coupled with effective data management, analysis, and reporting. Within the enrollment management arena, she has developed enrollment plans coupled with appropriate assessment measures to monitor progress toward stated goals and

to keep institutional leaders informed throughout the enrollment cycle. She has developed various enrollment and financial aid projection and tracking models, as well as student retention studies. She has lead the selection and implementation of administrative systems, emergency response planning, and the development of academic departmental productivity and faculty workload metrics. While serving at a private non-profit institution, she served in leadership roles throughout the enrollment management profession, with

a strength in financial aid, and has held titles as associate vice president for information and data management and assistant vice president for enrollment services. At a community college, she served as the director of student aid and information. Within AACRAO and PACRAO, she has served in various leadership roles, been a published author, and led numerous conference workshops and presentations.