

## Rules of Engagement

In a meeting with the University Leadership Team on October 29, 2007, E. Gordon Gee, President, The Ohio State University, shared his Rules of Engagement. During a visit to Ohio State in 2012, I met with Gee. After sharing my experiences with the *Leadership Principles and Practices* course, he gave me a copy of the Rules of Engagement, printed on Ohio State letterhead in the form of a memorandum. In the process of writing *Leadership Matters*, I requested Gee's permission to include the Rules of Engagement in the book. They are provided below.

I have shared some of my views regarding how I believe we should work together as a team and my own general philosophy regarding the administration of the University. Now that I have had more time to reflect on my return to Ohio State, I want to share with you the things that I believe are most important in order for us to have a successful tenure together. These are not new ideas—rather, as you talk to my colleagues at other institutions and those who worked with me previously at Ohio State, you will find them consistent with how I have previously managed my leadership responsibility.

### I. WE MUST HIRE AND KEEP EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

The single most important thing that we do as a University is to hire and retain extraordinary people. That goes without saying. But what should be some of the characteristics of these extraordinary people—which, of course, includes the people in this room?

- A. First of all, this person must be smart. That should be self-evident to everyone here today. But, for those who are to engage in administrative leadership (perhaps as opposed to regular faculty members), I do not mean that this person must act smart; I do not mean that this person must have a stilted, polysyllabic vocabulary; I do not mean that this person should be laden with obtuse jargon. I do mean that this person should be smart. Smart enough to listen carefully. Smart enough to exercise common sense. Smart enough to exercise good judgment and discernment. This person should have the ability to tell the important from the unimportant. And the ability to take complexity and distill it into simplicity. The surest sign to me personally that someone is smart is how clearly, directly, and plainly they express ideas.
- B. The second thing that I look for in a person is someone who gets things done—and gets them done at the pace the new world requires. If you are bright, but you do not get things done, I do not have any use for you. To get things done quickly, you must be decisive, you must understand that all decisions involve risk, and you must be courageous enough to take these risks intelligently. You must be dependable. You must be relentless and willing to defy and overcome any obstacle, whether internal or external. You must be self-sufficient—able to gather to yourself the resources required to get something done and not waiting for me for

permission—to move forward. My view is that people who get things done do not have the time, or interest, to spend time feeling sorry for themselves or for obsessing over circumstances or mistakes, theirs or others, that cannot be changed.

- C. The third thing that I believe characterizes extraordinary people is that they are nice. Now, there are clearly many extraordinary people in this world who are not nice. But this is our University and will be our administration, and we get to exercise our prerogative on this one. I think life is already tough enough without having to be around a lot of egotistical, abrasive, duplicitous people. I believe extraordinary people are respectful. I believe they are courteous. I believe they have the proper perspective. I believe they have the proper touch of humility. I believe they genuinely celebrate the success of their peers. I believe they are not irritable nor are they arrogant. They do not engage in academic politics. They are not rude. They take their job seriously. They take their colleagues seriously, but they do not take themselves too seriously. And, perhaps as important as any of this is that they are not status-conscious—they are not the kind of people who will not spend time nor do business with people who have a lesser title than do they.

Now, I insist that you insist on this attribute. It cannot just be words, and it cannot be just the preference of one or two of the leaders of this institution. The organization itself—you leaders—must insist that people be this way.

- D. The fourth expectation that I have is that you develop the habit, courage, and ability to be straightforward. We should have the ability to speak plainly and naturally with each other because, as I have emphasized, we are colleagues—we are a team.

## II. THE ACID TEST OF LEADERSHIP IS THE ABILITY TO HIRE AND KEEP EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

This brings me to my second main point. If it is indeed important for this University to hire and retain extraordinary people, then it should be readily apparent that the acid test of your own leadership will be the ability to hire and retain extraordinary people. What do you have to do, therefore, to meet this goal?

- A. First, you have to be smart, results-oriented, nice, and straightforward. By and large, the type of people we want to attract to this University are not going to work with you if you do not have these characteristics.
- B. Second, you have to deal with non-performers, because great people are not going to want to be around if you cannot deal with the people issues in your areas of responsibility. I can assure you that a great person will not stay with us if people who are known to not work, and who do not achieve results, are carried by the University. And not only will great people leave, something equally intolerable

will happen: by keeping non-performers around, we will lower the standards of the organization. It will be acceptable to be mediocre. That, unfortunately, is the tragedy of many universities in this country.

- C. The ultimate litmus test for you and your success is whether you have been hiring and retaining extraordinary people, people stronger than yourselves. Notice I did not say that you have the potential to hire and keep great people—but whether, in fact, you have actually been doing it. The people with whom you work and surround yourself will be the tangible evidence of all the intangible qualities we require and covet in our academic and administrative leadership. The evidence of whether or not, ultimately, you will be successful at Ohio State tomorrow will be the existence today of a high percentage of extraordinary people in your areas of responsibility.

Now there is a corollary of which I must remind you. We have all come across a senior leader where it is well known that no person wants to work for that individual—whether it is because that person is incompetent or indecisive or arrogant or obtuse or thoughtless. Can this happen at Ohio State? Of course it can. But it should not, because this is a University that truly aspires to the highest standards of greatness. And that is why we must develop tools to appropriately monitor the success of our leaders and to allow us to make change when necessary.

### III. FULLY BE YOURSELF

My third major point is that each of you has an obligation to yourself, to this University, to your colleagues, to your family, and to your friends to fully be yourself. To bring, directly or indirectly, your beliefs, your passions, your interests—all that you are—fully with you to your job. All too often I have found that those in academic leadership spend years or even decades adding artificial elements to their personalities, and in so doing, begin to leave at home certain things that are a fundamental part of themselves. As a result, they often become a little bit more dull and predictable and passionless and joyless.

I want us to have fun. And I am not talking about superficial fun—though that is certainly part of it. I am talking about intellectual, substantive fun. And while I understand no assignment is without its less-than-fun aspects, I am urging each of you to develop a thoughtfully conceived plan and process of aligning your real interest, passions, abilities, and values—indirectly or directly—with your assignment. You cannot accomplish this mission of bringing your whole self to work by simply thinking about it. You must put together a concrete plan. Develop a list, honestly and thoughtfully, of the things that give you the most intellectual pleasure in your work. Then recruit and develop people with whom you work with talents and interests that balance yours, thus giving yourself the opportunity to spend more time at the things that give you the most satisfaction by delegating

those things that are not as well aligned with your interests and strengths. And if you have chosen your colleagues well, you will be accomplishing the same thing for them.

You have asked the question, and I have given the answer in terms of my own values for people with whom I work. My sense about the majority of you in this room is that you represent a pervasive, overwhelmingly obsessive, almost pathological will to do well. You would not be in these positions if, but for all practical purposes, you were like addicts when it comes to making decisions and getting meaningful, substantive, real things done. My only urging to you is that an obsessive will to win must be coupled with other powerful notions of the human experience—of humor, of deep caring, of traveling the extra mile for the other person, of humility, and of having the courage to fully be yourselves. The results, in my view, will be explosively powerful.

#### IV. NOW, LET ME TURN TO SOME GENERAL OPERATING PRINCIPLES THAT I BELIEVE ARE NECESSARY FOR OUR SUCCESS

- A. The key to our effectiveness as leaders rests on the simple decision of how we decide to work together. I have made the decision that we will not continue as a collection of people with different goals and agendas who happen to share a common table. We must decide to set aside our individual aspirations and motivations and to truly function as one. By the way, that will be a very hard decision. I submit that the decision to work together for common goals is not natural. In fact, it flies directly in the face of your desires for individuality, control, and territory. It requires each of us to unlearn years of organizational bad habits—bad habits that have never served this institution well. We must work as one team and drive ourselves toward operating as one University. That compact of the common, I believe, will be one of the major reasons for future success and progress at this University.
- B. Trust is the oxygen of teams. Without trust, the team, like most organisms, will die. Trust does not automatically exist in a team environment. Trust must be built and nurtured and given time. I believe, in candor, that we do not yet have a high level of trust among ourselves. We must now work very hard to build that trust. We must start by returning to the expectation that we will be forthright and truthful with each other. We must return to an expectation of transparency with each other. We must do away with gossip and petty sniping. As senior officers, you need to learn to speak directly with each other about specific problems. You cannot always expect me to act as a referee. But if I am, I will expect my decisions to be final. Of course, I expect you to speak directly with me about specific issues that cannot be managed among yourselves or in which there are issues with me directly.
- C. As part of our commitment to the team, we must learn to value conflict. Conflict means that we trust each other enough to disagree. Conflict also means that ideas

are valued and discussed. Conflict means ideas are aggressively debated. And, conflict means that decisions, once made, are adhered to with a passion. Once a decision is made by the team or by me, I expect total support of that decision as a team. And, I also will expect that decision to be supported actively, and not passively.

- D. We must learn to collaborate even better. Each of you is highly talented and opinionated. Each of you is accustomed to independence and running your own units. Therefore, your first inclination is not to collaborate. I submit that the lack of collaboration is one of the reasons why so many teams are marginalized and do not achieve greatness. Let me be clear: there is no such thing as friendly competition in the executive suite. At any level, competition is toxic, and it undermines trust. When you become competitors rather than collaborators, you then will start to withhold information and resources from one another. Rather than cooperation, you will start to seek advantage. That possibility, at this University, at this time, is unacceptable.
  
- E. As part of our rededication to team, we must learn to make decisions in a timely fashion. In this regard, I pledge to each of you that I will not delay the decisions that I should make, but I will also not usurp the decision that you should make. At the same time, I do expect to be consulted or informed about the major strategic decisions that are yours to make. I will hold you accountable to make tough decisions, as I expect you to hold me accountable to support those decisions and to make timely decisions on behalf of the University. We must all remember that we will not be judged on how many ideas we have—only on how many we make happen.
  
- F. We must hold each other accountable. In order to be effective, we can tolerate no one who underperforms. While not everyone within our own teams may have the same ability, they should have the same level of commitment that we expect of ourselves as a team. As I will speak to each of you about your own performance, I expect you to speak to each other about performance concerns, rather than always bringing them to me for resolution. That is how we learn to work and play with each other.
  
- G. We must manage to the middle. Right now I believe this is one of our most important failings and challenges. We must insist that our middle managers work cooperatively with each other and support each other. This requires us to make certain that middle managers in your own areas work cooperatively, share resources, and support middle managers in other departments and divisions throughout the University. This will require each of you to diligently oversee and intervene to undo years of silo-based behavior. By insisting on cooperation and collaboration among our middle managers, we also must identify those who might someday be members of the senior team or be able to take on significant

additional responsibilities. Each of you must be willing to help advance the careers of those with whom you work. You must be both a leader and a teacher. Talent abounds at Ohio State, and we must take the time to grow it.

- H. I also want to remind each of us to manage our gatekeepers. Those who manage our time and resources must understand how important it is to cooperate with their peers across the institution. Although I believe that we have little of this, occasionally gatekeepers can assume the cloak of those for whom they work and act imperially. These individuals have the responsibility to execute our vision, not to derail or delay projects that have already been decided. We cannot tolerate such behavior.
  
- I. We must learn to keep score. By that I mean that we must measure our progress. This will make certain that we are accountable. It shows a true commitment on our behalf to stewardship. It also allows us to show clear results to a sometimes doubting campus community, alumni, legislators, and of course, our Board of Trustees. And, learning to keep score will also require us to constantly check our course of action and to make course corrections when necessary.

My final thought is that I need you to rekindle your shared enthusiasm, energy, and passions for the institution. I will expect our loyalty to our goals, to each other, and to me. Loyalty does not mean that we do not tolerate dissent, but it does mean that I will not tolerate disloyalty. Loyalty, passion, energy, enthusiasm, a sense of urgency, and a clear-minded commitment to excellence will allow us to be the architects for the future of this University.