
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Stand Up and Lead

Raise your hand if you are completely comfortable with the unknown. No?

OK, let's try again. Raise your hand if you are completely comfortable being a leader anytime, anywhere or if you are willing to take on an unpleasant task that will come with a high degree of risk.

Let's be honest — who would jump up and raise a hand to lead in unknown, high risk and potentially unpleasant circumstances? Leadership is difficult work. And, rarely do we intentionally teach it or talk about it, until of course, it goes missing.

Yet what many of us may not realize is that a lack of leadership in our families, our communities and even in our state can be a deterrent to good health. Let me say that another way — without solid leadership, our families, communities, business and industry and our overall well-being can suffer.

Historically, leadership is rarely linked to health. But Kansans think it should be.

In the late 1980s the Kansas Health Foundation, the state's largest non-profit philanthropy, conducted a listening tour to gather information from Kansans about Kansas health. They found we were worried about the usual suspects — good jobs, access to quality healthcare and strong public schools. Participants, however, overwhelmingly shared a common worry about the potential lack of thoughtful and competent civic leadership in their communities.

The thing I love about this survey is that it is the voice of Kansans — from small towns to urban centers both east and west, north and south and all backgrounds and livelihoods in between. From these voices, the Kansas Health Foundation established the Kansas Leadership Center and hired former Kansas legislator Ed O'Malley, as the CEO.

I met Ed about a year ago and let me tell you, he is passionate about teaching leadership skills to Kansans. Well you know my passion about the future and our sense of responsibility to future generations. And one thing led to another and pretty soon, Ed and I had a vision established to weave leadership competencies and principles throughout the Emporia State curriculum.

And this is where leadership and education starts to get really exciting in Kansas.

At Emporia State, we've decided our students will be exposed to

the four core competencies of leadership. These are diagnose situation, manage self, energize others and intervene skillfully. And the students will learn the five basic principles that teach leadership is an activity, not a position; anyone can lead, anytime, anywhere; it starts with you and must engage others; your purpose must be clear; and it is risky.

By weaving these teachings throughout the curriculum, our students will enter the workforce prepared to lead for the common good of their organizations, communities and families.

This is a game changer. I've always been enthusiastic about our partnership with the Kansas Learning Center but I wasn't prepared for the remarkable enthusiasm brought to the table by our faculty.

"The idea of leadership as an activity opens the door for a student to make positive changes in her family," Jodie Leiss, clinical instructor in Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, recently shared with me. "This student can take the lead in teaching her family about better nutrition where maybe in the past she didn't feel like speaking up would be worth it. The KLC principles are really empowering."

Gary Wyatt, our associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, echoed Leiss' sentiments about our KLC partnership.

"At some point all of us encounter situations within ourselves where we can't look the other way," Wyatt said. "These leadership competencies equip our students with the skills to lead anytime, anywhere by engaging others and accepting the responsibility to intervene for the common good."

I've mentioned before my love of the movie "Under the Tuscan Sun." I think often of those railroad tracks built between Italy and Austria before anyone knew whether a locomotive could be designed to even use them. Every day in education we are preparing our students for circumstances we can't even imagine, jobs that don't yet exist and technologies that are more science fiction than science. Through this partnership, our students will be prepared.

Raise your hand if you feel healthier already.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
