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Acting on the Pivot Point

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Case Study



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Acting on the Pivot Point

Abstract

When facing opportunities, effective leaders trod a path that effectively incorporates ethical and empathetic leadership considerations and characteristics to drive change. The actions and impacts of two very different women facing challenges as change moments each tie back to Kouzes and Posner's traits of exemplary leaders such as model the way and inspire a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Rear Admiral Meredith Austin, United States Coast Guard (retired), and Patricia (Trish) Foster, Executive Director Emeritus of Bentley University's Center for Women in Business have led transformative changes. Admiral Austin was crucial in coordinating the early-pandemic smooth return of the Grand Princess cruise ship to the United States, as well as bringing together disparate agencies with competing priorities working to manage the wind-down of cruise ship operations and the repatriation of thousands of cruise ship employees to nations around the globe. Seeing opportunities for improvement, Foster was the architect, developer, and implementor of initiatives that inculcated diverse, equitable, and inclusive behaviors into the internal and external operations at Bentley University. While their work was very different, they each acted upon unique pivot points of opportunity, applying empathy and action to create a lasting impact for their communities while setting an example for long-term change.

Introduction

When there is an opportunity for change, or a pivot point, all eyes do not necessarily turn to the person who was born or made to be the leader. Rather, history has shown that it is the individual who, in that moment, feels capable and confident, will lead the way. Those who seize the moment will either implicitly or explicitly have a vision which guides their strategic approach (Hackett & Spurgeon, 1998). The situation itself, including organizational context

and the individuals encountered and involved, also impacts the leader's style (Hersey, 1995; Ventresca, 2014). Rather than studying the intentions or attributes of a leader's mindset, Kouzes and Posner (2017) posit that studying the actual behaviors exhibited when leaders are at their best enables understanding of what it takes to make extraordinary things happen. This case study examines the actions of two leaders faced with the opportunity to lead others with vision and understanding.

Rear Admiral Meredith Austin, United States Coast Guard (retired), and Patricia (Trish) Foster, Executive Director Emeritus of Bentley University's Center for Women in Business, in Waltham, MA, have led transformative changes in very different situations. Admiral Austin was crucial in coordinating the early-pandemic smooth return of the Grand Princess cruise ship to the United States, as well as bringing together disparate agencies with competing priorities working to manage the wind-down of cruise ship operations and the repatriation of thousands of cruise ship employees worldwide. At Bentley University, Foster identified opportunities for improvement, becoming the architect, developer, and implementor of initiatives that inculcated diverse, equitable, and inclusive behaviors into the internal and external operations at Bentley University. While their work was very different, they each acted upon unique pivot points (Peters, 2014) of opportunity, applying empathy and action to create a lasting impact for their communities while setting an example for long-term change.

Patricia (Trish) Foster

Patricia (Trish) Foster, Executive Director Emeritus of Bentley University's Center for Women in Business, has left a lasting impression on the school at large. Joining the institution in 2008, Bentley was widely known as a small, New England, business school where mostly white-male students majored in accounting. Her work came into focus when she began her tenure leading the Center for Women in Business in 2014.

Prior to Bentley, well before the #MeToo era,¹ Foster worked with "mostly good guys, but sexism was rampant and managing male colleagues was a particular challenge" (personal communication, 2022). Becoming a mother herself and facing significant personal health challenges along the way, Foster has acquired a sensitivity to the concerns of others, and a passion for the idea that everyone in an organization is driven by unique needs. In effect, she was a role model (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) for other women, parents, and cancer survivors. By the time she began her work with the CWB, Foster acknowledges that the center was already making progress to improve gender equity in the workplace. That said, she made it her priority to engage in broader and deeper work since, in her words, "gender is often the starting point for DE&I."

While topics of diversity and inclusion have been at the forefront of dialogue recently in United States' higher education (Barnett, 2020), this was not the case just five years ago. Foster found that some work at Bentley was siloed, and many processes were outdated. In terms of DEI, she explained that there were some progressive individuals who demonstrated an interest in DE&I efforts in their teaching, recruiting, and research, but others "not so much." The complexity, she explained, stemmed from "the multiple stakeholders who we wanted to

¹ #MeToo became a prominent term in October, 2017, when multitudes of female actresses came forward to accuse Harvey Weinstein of sexual misconduct. This term now signifies a movement for anyone who has experienced sexual misconduct to speak up (Hillstrom, 2018).

influence and support: the students, the faculty and staff, and very importantly, external constituents like the business that hire Bentley grads...all of whom influence each other.” In other words, deliberate efforts to align resources were not yet in place.

First inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) work on the impact of intersectional identities, Foster made it a priority to formally establish mechanisms that focused energy and attention on DE&I opportunities for Bentley and the surrounding community. Foster shared her vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), set her intention, and acted deliberately to enact the CWB’s mission to “create more inclusive and equitable workplace cultures where all employees thrive and succeed.” Further, Foster challenged long standing processes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) to truly inculcate the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusivity as the framework under which she led the CWB.

Initial steps for broadening the DEI efforts at Bentley included gaining the support of the university’s then-president, Gloria Larson, (who served in this role 2007-2017), and situating the CWB in the Advancement department, “the part of the school that deeply values relationships and understand the importance of legacy and stewardship” Foster explained.

With executive sponsorship and external funding, Foster created a fellowship program to give students a foundational knowledge of DE&I, with an emphasis on gender equity. She founded the Men of Alliance program (Bentley, 2022), an allyship group for undergraduate students who identify as male and want to step up as allies for women. Bentley’s program was the first to extend this concept beyond the graduate-level in the region.

By her third year, Trish co-designed and launched the Women’s Leadership Program, a four-year co-curricular offering to provide students with leadership, mentoring, and direct business connections. Program enrollment has grown from its first cohort and now has to be capped to maintain its integrity. As programs that are meant to develop participants’ self-reliance, confidence, and ability to act as leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), it is also important to note that both the Allies and WLP are open to all students, regardless of gender identity.

Foster’s efforts were part of a stream of important DE&I initiatives at Bentley University, such as the establishment of the Bentley Brave Norms and the Racial Equality Toolkit which serve as resources to all school community members. Her work with the CWB helped forge the path into university consideration and efforts for many of these areas. While measuring the impact of initiatives such as these is always difficult, there is a real sense that the DE&I dialogue has integrated itself into the hearts and minds of all who are on campus. From a minor topic, it has become an issue front and center in the minds of students, faculty, and staff. Bentley now offers a Bachelor of Arts in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and among the student population, diversity has increased by 10% since Foster’s arrival.

Leadership is a difficult challenge. Rather than studying the intentions or attributes of a leader’s mindset, Kouzes and Posner (2017) posit that studying the actual behaviors exhibited when leaders are at their best enables understanding of what it takes to make extraordinary things happen. Trish Foster embraced the opportunity to create meaningful differences in the lives of thousands. Along the way, she built a strong team and allies for the faculty, staff, and students; her work impacted these individuals by sharing her visions of the future.

Meredith Austin

As Covid-19 was officially declared a pandemic in early 2020, United States agencies were on full alert. Rear Admiral Meredith Austin, United States Coast Guard, had over thirty years of experience in emergency management and interagency coordination when she was designated as the Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Incident Command and Control within the Office of the Assistant Secretary Preparedness and Response for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. As citizens both at home and abroad dealt with emotional responses such as fear and anxiety, leaders at all levels were responsible for aiding citizens of their own country and others. Admiral Austin recognized this pivot point, leading the way for others to work together and resolve critical concerns.

With countries and companies in global shut down mode, cruise ships, their crews, and their passengers, became a significant concern. The Princess Cruise Lines Grand Princess ship was stricken by a COVID-19 outbreak while at sea off the west coast of the U.S., making it necessary for leaders at many levels to decide whether, where, and how to disembark passengers, and critically, care for the onboard crew by early March 2020. Austin's management of this highly visible situation entailed the overall coordination of agencies, organizations, and levels of government needed to care for all personnel aboard, including international crew members, and safely dock the ship. She continued to facilitate the coordination of critical stakeholders, sharing essential information and lessons learned as agencies, cruise and port operators, and state/local governments effectively wound down U.S. cruise operations as the impact of the pandemic became clear. Building on her extensive experience, Austin modeled the way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017) for teams working together to pivot and successfully overcome emotional reactions, building processes for future emergencies while caring for thousands of individuals.

Similar to other cruise ships early in the pandemic, the Grand Princess had suffered a significant COVID-19 outbreak and needed to return to the United States not long after its departure on February 21, 2020 (Goffard, 2020). In a fraught political and medical situation, Admiral Austin proactively coordinated teams across the federal government, local and state governments, agencies at all levels, and civilian port authorities to effectively dock the ship in California while planning for the evacuation and quarantine of all personnel aboard for eventual return home. Inspiring a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2017), Austin shared that it was important to anticipate the needs of stakeholders and anticipate information, providing an opportunity for all to be informed and engaged, saying that "You have to understand what their biggest concern is" since many do not have the same understanding of the goals and objectives. Particularly in difficult circumstances, she said that leaders should "share what information you can to increase understanding where possible. You don't always have the time or ability to share, but when you can and have time, people want to know why they're doing what they are. This gives them ownership of the process, gives them something they want to do and be part of" (Personal Communication, 2022). Leaders create change and influence others in many ways, and communication enables people to understand what they are working towards and why. As Austin noted, leaders must share their vision of the future for organizations to achieve it.

Working at the pivot point also means building teams for the future (Ford, Loughry, Misty, & Ford, 2020). According to Austin, one of the most significant impacts a leader can make is to treat people well. Leaders build up their own teams, developing others' abilities for the future.

By building up others, these leaders enable the teams they develop to carry these skills and abilities forward in other circumstances, what Kouzes and Posner described as encouraging the heart. She said that “The biggest impact is that people will take it (the lessons they learned and their experiences) and keep in it their own leadership toolkits” (Interview, 2022). She noted that for leaders, it’s essential to be positive, particularly in crisis or emergency situations, as others are observing your actions. She said “Take care of yourself. Take care of people doing the hard work, ensure that they have the tools needed to do their jobs.” With these leadership lessons, Austin showed others how to successfully coordinate a wide-ranging response and, through empathy, care for not only her own team but also others, building teams and leaders for the future.

Leading at the Pivot Point

Leadership is a difficult challenge, one that both Meredith Austin and Trish Foster embraced to create meaningful differences in the lives of thousands. Along the way, they built teams by sharing their visions of the future. While managing very different circumstances, their leadership shared a common framework. Each of these circumstances could have had very different results, without the meaningful change and impact on communities and individuals that Austin and Foster created. Throughout empathy and understanding, they leveraged their own experience and modeled the way. Bringing together disparate groups to create a path for change, Austin and Foster also built the experience and leadership toolkit of others. And in times of challenge and conflict, leaders must also consider one of the most important elements of both leaders’ actions- taking care of others, encouraging the heart.

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Susan's research interests include the impact leadership enactment has on organizational culture and employee engagement, with specific focus on supporting flexible work arrangements. Prior to her academic career, Dr Vroman worked for over 20 years as an organizational effectiveness and strategic human resource management executive and advisor. Her consulting niche is in entrepreneurial businesses that are "coming of age" and where the people business was recently invited to the table.

Susan holds her undergraduate degree in Communication and Human Resource Development from James Madison University, a Master's Degree in Leadership Studies from Harvard University, and her doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership Studies from Northeastern University. She is currently a Lecturer of Management at Bentley University and can be reached at SVROMAN@bentley.edu.

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Tiffany Danko is a professional in emergency management, maritime and homeland security, intelligence, and international affairs with over 27 years of applied experience. She has led multi-disciplinary organizations worldwide in senior leadership roles, and is a Rear Admiral in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve. Tiffany has also developed graduate homeland security and emergency management programs incorporating extensive experiential learning opportunities. She has published articles on various topics in organizational leadership as well as military matters.

Tiffany holds a doctorate in Organizational Leadership Studies from Northeastern University. She is a 2013 U.S. Naval War College Command and Staff Program graduate and a 2015 Joint Forces Staff College Joint Combined Warfighting School graduate, with an MA from San Diego State University and a BS from the United States Coast Guard Academy.

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