



Looking on the Bright Side of Life

Rob Kramer offers some tactics for leading your team, department, school or university through this trying time.

By Rob Kramer

May 22, 2020

In the British comedy team Monty Python's film *Life of Brian*, a character who seems to be in dire straits sings a classic song: "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

Though seething with sarcasm and humor within the context of the movie, the scene is also an endearing reminder to stay positive in the face of tough challenges.

Between the current public health crisis and all the negative attention higher education is receiving -- bad press, bad decision making and sometimes plain bad luck -- it is easy to forget the many good ideas being employed in our academic institutions.

Sometimes grand and sometimes simple, the scope may vary, but the impacts are certainly felt and appreciated by the campus community.

In leadership education circles, we see and study the full gamut of leader behaviors, from great turns to poor acts of governance and decision making. In my 20 years of working with leaders in academe, here are some of the better tactics I have seen.

Perhaps some will be useful as you lead your team, department, school or university during this trying time.

Little gestures matter. If you are not sure what to do to appreciate and support your faculty or team, just ask them. You'd be surprised at how far little gestures can go in helping people feel supported and appreciated. Reach out to each member of your

team -- offer your concern for their well-being and their family's health and safety. And then listen -- demonstrate your genuine interest in them. Don't underestimate the little gestures that can make a sincere impact.

Professional development matters. Consider providing coaches -- confidential, professionally certified, strategic-thinking partners -- to support people's growth, which can be carried out virtually. I am working with a dean on the other side of the country whose institution has been growing, and she is creating new administrative roles for faculty members to take on. Rather than sending each person to training programs, she has developed coaching teams grouped by administrative responsibilities where people are either working at similar levels or are at similar places in their careers. Each person gets individual hours working with the coach, and then as a group, they have a number of collective team sessions facilitated by the coach. This process allows new administrators to have a safe space to talk through situations individually with their coach and a platform to provide peer support to one another. Ultimately, the process enhances both individual and team development.

Carrots matter. It is also important to recognize that people appreciate rewards. Understand funding streams and what grants are available on campus or in professional circles, and work hard to secure as many pots of money as possible -- small or large as they may be. Rewards may come in all shapes and sizes, from semester leaves to gift cards. Don't underestimate any gift, and work hard to find as many as you can.

Dignity matters. I gained great insight working with a university president, new to his role. The institution had numerous problems -- financial concerns, poor faculty and staff morale, unaddressed student behavioral issues. The list goes on. Yet this president pointed out that one of the first things the institution was going to do was to improve the bathrooms across campus. Most bathrooms were deteriorating and not well maintained. This president's belief was that basic dignity spoke volumes for how

people experienced their work environments. Having clean, updated, well-maintained and, as much as possible, beautified bathrooms sent a message that the university cared for basic human dignity. Some in the campus community groaned at the decision, saying that valuable resources could be spent in other places. But the strategy worked. The main thing to remember in this trying time is: sometimes you have to look at what people *aren't* complaining about to know where to focus, and provide things they don't realize they need.

Honesty matters. One of the more profound, and often overlooked impacts leaders can make is to simply act honestly and transparently. I have been lucky enough over the years to work with many outstanding academic leaders. One of most consistently used and powerful strategies I have seen deployed is just to tell the truth. That includes anything from keeping the campus regularly updated on major initiatives or public health concerns to emailing someone in advance that their meeting tomorrow may have to be moved due to an emergency -- and then following through. It can be owning up to mistakes and uncertainties or just letting people know there's no new news to report today. Leaders: tell people what you know, and also what you *don't* know. Honesty is free. The payoff is huge.

These strategies may seem like small potatoes compared to the major issues that academic leaders are confronting today. But for many people in higher education, daily interactions with their leaders create and encapsulate their campus's actual culture -- regardless of what the mission, vision and values statements on the website describe. How are your principal investigators, department heads, managers, associate provosts, deans and other leaders managing their daily interactions? Perhaps share this article among yourselves. And if nothing else, watch plenty of Monty Python.

Bio

Rob Kramer is the senior leadership consultant at the University of North Carolina's Institute for the Arts and Humanities, as well as a leadership coach and consultant in higher education and academic medicine.