



UK Board Chair Brockman Raises the Game with Good Leadership as appearing in Business Lexington, June 23, 2011

by Joel DiGirolamo

Excitement is in the air. The University of Kentucky has a new leader, Dr. Eli Capilouto. His face is the one we will soon associate with the university as a new era unfolds. We eagerly await glimpses of his leadership style and vision, wondering what imprint he will leave behind.

In the meantime I'd like to introduce you to a less visible leader at the university, but someone who can teach us a great deal about leadership. Britt Brockman is chair of the Board of Trustees and leads with a soft yet firm voice, steeped in the down-home texture of Kentucky values.

I have continually been impressed with Brockman's effective style, a simple approach that is easily summed in one word—collaborative. While not overly charismatic, he is firm in his resolve to complete a mission and always eager and willing to listen, to glean any insight that may have been overlooked in previous analyses.

We know from research that individuals are more satisfied with decisions out of their control when they are involved in the process. A phrase we frequently hear is, "I just want my day in court." People want to be heard. They want to be acknowledged and respected. While they may not always agree with decisions we make as leaders, they are more likely to feel the decision is fair if we have listened to them and considered their view.

Brockman epitomizes this philosophy. He does not shy away from controversial issues, instead choosing to confront them head on, exposing all the cards and hidden agendas, revealing all the facts and fostering open dialogue that leads to convergence upon a decision acceptable, if not consensual, for all.

Our lives frequently traverse circuitous paths and Brockman's is true to that model. He entered the College of Pharmacy at the University of Kentucky in 1977 with little knowledge and no interest in politics. In a pivotal opportunity, he struck up a friendship with Jim Newberry, the man who went on to become Lexington's 50th mayor. Newberry kindled an interest in politics in Brockman, resulting in his election as vice president of the student senate in 1980-'81 and a subsequent term as president of the student senate in 1981-'82.

It was also at the University of Kentucky where Brockman met one of his role models, Dr. Otis Singletery, then president of the university. Singletery's clear goals and ability to set a lucid vision left a deep impression in Brockman and a model he strived toward.

President Abraham Lincoln serves as another role model. Historians' files are swollen with accounts of President Lincoln's deft ability to embrace opponents, bring them into the fold, and align their potent energy with his vision. His presidency was replete

with dissension: a civil war, freedom for slaves, moderates and extremists in his own political party, and more. Observing Brockman's leadership style, it is clear how President Lincoln has shaped his pragmatic desire for discussion, challenge, and goal of consensus.

Three days before he was to assume chair of the board of trustees, Brockman listened as President Lee Todd announced he would be leaving his post. Never one to shrink from a daunting task, he began the search and selection process, beginning with a committee that included faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and students. One of its first tasks was to determine a set of criteria for the new president. True to form, the process was well-structured and included many views even at the eleventh hour before the final decision.

Highly visible and often controversial activities such as this can create tremendous stress. Not so for Brockman. He views this event as one of his most exhilarating. As he said, "This process of picking the new president was a decision to be made by board members who come from different backgrounds and different parts of the state. Our diversity became a strength because of our shared commitment toward finding

the best leader for the university. This was a time when people came together at a pivotal moment in UK's history."

Brockman provides the following advice for aspiring leaders: people bring experience and knowledge to the table and it is your job to utilize it well. Forging consensus and seeking compromise is not a weakness, protect your team fiercely in bad times, and finally, share credit and be willing to listen and take blame even if it isn't yours to take.

Kentucky is fortunate to have an exemplary leader such as Brockman. Pick a role, chair of the board of trustees at the University of Kentucky, managing partner of the John-Kenyon American Eye Institute, or past-president of the Adath Jeshurun Synagogue—and you can observe Brockman humbly weaving his way through the weeds, asking questions and achieving clarity at every turn. There's a lot we can learn from him.

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References and Recommended Reading

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