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Leadership Lessons from Academia

Dr. Matthew S. Holland

President, Utah Valley University



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In this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series, Dr. Jack Zenger interviews Dr. Matthew S. Holland, President of Utah Valley University, to learn more about the role of leadership as it relates to the academic and corporate worlds.

Dr. Holland has been the President of Utah Valley University since 2009. The university, with an enrollment of more than 32,000 students, is the third largest institution of higher education in the state of Utah.

Dr. Holland is a political scientist by training. His career spans both academic and corporate entities, having served as a university professor and as chief of staff for the top executive of the Monitor Group, an international consulting firm. He is the author of the book, *Bonds of Affection: Civic Charity and the Making of America*.

This eBook is a synopsis of that conversation. Listen to the podcast for the full conversation.

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How important is leadership to the success of an academic institution?

Leadership matters. It matters on a practical basis and it matters on an output basis. You need leadership at all levels. You can have the best leadership in the world at the senior-most levels, but if you don't have colleagues at all levels that execute leadership, it is hard to accomplish what you need to accomplish.

What do highly successful leaders do that make them more effective?

You have to take appropriate stock of every stakeholder. This might be an important principle in any organization, but it is especially true in higher education where we have very different stakeholders.

We have faculty who look one way, students who look another way, legislators who look a third way, and trustees on top of that. Each of these groups has its own dynamic. We must have organizational agility to be able to move between these different stakeholders, to listen to them, and to bring these disparate groups together in a common, coherent path.

You have had experience in both the corporate world and in the academic world. What are the big differences that you've seen related to leadership? Is it the number and complexity of stakeholders?

I think the number and disparateness of stakeholders is more pronounced in higher education and in the public sector than it is in the private sector.

In the corporate world, there is a premium on speed. You will be forgiven for a lot of stuff if you act with dispatch and get it right. In higher education, you can get it right and you can act fast, but if you haven't brought people along, you can do the right thing and still pay a very heavy price.

One of the nicest compliments I've received is that I have "big ears." You need to take the time to listen to each of the groups. Often, it is just that—people just want a chance to have been heard and feel like they had a voice in the decisions. I've found that this matters more in this context than it did when I worked in the private sector. Not to dismiss it in the private sector, but if you get it right and you move, you'll be seen as visionary and great.

Do you think the corporate world is moving in this direction where there are disparate stakeholders?

As the world gets more complex, globalized, technological, and more tied to public/private partnerships, I think that the public sector needs to learn some of these lessons from higher education.

Higher education is also recognizing that it needs to be more responsive and move faster.

Despite everything you just heard me say, the mistake you can make is to be so attentive to your stakeholders that you are ground up in the inertia of never moving forward because you are trying to listen to and please

everybody. At some point, you have to take that willingness to listen and that willingness to try to broker information from a lot of different parties, and you have to move and push things forward. You can't wait for universal approbation and unanimity. I think this is what higher education is learning from business.

What lessons do you think the private sector can learn from academia?

Academia, by its very nature, is inclined to study the data and to make informed decisions based on that data. In academia, there are less impressionistic, go-with-the-gut styles of leadership.

The private sector is starting to pick this up. The tech sector, with its ability to manage big data sets, is driving more and more of this. But even with all of that data available, the need for speed makes companies not as attentive to the full level of analysis that should be done.

When educational institutions act, they act with remarkable information. I think that it is fascinating that if you go back 50 years and look at the top 20 businesses and compare that list to the top 20 businesses today, those are completely different lists. If you go back and look at the top 20 colleges 50 years ago and the top 20 today, it is pretty close to the same.

These successful institutions are consistently making really good decisions. The way they hire, generate support, and make decisions about what they should be doing consistently puts the very best institutions forward, year after year. There is some secret there and I think that it is the depth and level of analysis that go behind decisions.

Having lived in both worlds, are there important lessons the academic world could learn from private sector?

What businesses have figured out is that they have to be relentlessly focused on the customer.



Higher education sometimes chokes on a principle like that. Higher education likes to see themselves as above purely commercial interests. We have got to become more responsive to our customers. At the primary level, it's students; but it's not just students, we have other roles in the community.

As academics, it is easy to get wrapped up in our own idiosyncratic, intellectual interests—this is one of the joys of academic life. With the pressures of higher-educational funding today and with what communities need from institutions, communities need to see more of a payoff from institutions. This means that individual faculty members and administrators need to be attuned to and deliver on what students need, what citizens and taxpayers need, and what the employers surrounding the university need. Universities must get better at this and businesses have really set the path for us.

Professors don't always aspire to be department heads, and department heads don't always aspire to be deans. What is academia doing to develop the next generation of leaders?

You have put your finger on a problem we have in academia and it starts with the individual inputs. People who go into academia, for the very reasons they go into academia, are not always inclined to want to be in a leadership or management position. In many cases, they were fleeing that to be able to have a solitary existence of reading, writing, and occasional teaching.

Institutions are also not highly rewarded, trained, and accustomed to doing leadership development. On a macro level there are some national consortiums developing that have recognized that this is a problem and they are sponsoring leadership training moments.

We have tried to take a chapter of that. We have developed an internal leadership development program and I think we are seeing more institutions starting to do this. This is another point where we are perhaps a little slower to the table than businesses have been, but we're starting to catch on.



You've been in this position for six years. What other big lessons have you learned?

One of the lessons I've learned is not to panic. On any given day, things bubble up to your desk that, on the surface, look like immediate crises and the sky is falling. With a day or two of perspective and a little percolation, things that seemed bad are not so bad.

Another lesson I've learned is that it is so vital to protect think time—time to think more broadly and in long-distance terms.

Before I pick up my phone and before I start reading the newspapers, I go to a quiet space in my home. It's a time to read, reflect, and meditate. I'm a religious person, so there's a little bit of prayer there too.

This is really important time for me. I don't start thinking about the university. I start more broadly: reading what I want to read and being inspired by what I want to be inspired by. Inevitably, it takes me into thoughts about the university.

With my staff, we protect chunks of time where I'm just not going to be scheduled that I can use to just think. I also do this with my senior officers. We sometimes have no agenda, just big blocks of time to think about the next year. We might have a few thought questions but no other agenda. Inevitably, these times drive the planning process for us for the coming year.

What has been your biggest leadership surprise?

Maybe the biggest surprise is that I could do it. I didn't come into this role with a ton of experience. That was a concern to some people here and, frankly, it was a concern to me. Six years in, I think it has been a successful administration and I have been able to do it.

I was able to do it through balancing a combination of two things:

One is to trust people around me. I inherited a good team. They had a lot of experience and I didn't. So I listened to them. They didn't always agree with me, but at least I could take their input.



That said, there can be an overreliance on that too. At some point you have to trust yourself. You have to be able to say, “I’m seeing something that other folks aren’t seeing and I’ve got to push that forward.”

What has been your experience working successfully with a large board of advisors?

Boards tend to be either very helpful or very obstructionist. I have learned a few lessons about how to make boards become more helpful.

One is to pay attention to the boards and who populates them. We don’t always have control over that. In our case it’s a gubernatorial appointment, but we spend a lot of time with the governor suggesting people we think would be a good fit.

We also want to make sure that these are people who won’t just be rubberstamps. I don’t want a rubberstamp board. There are lots of higher-education institutions that aim for that. I want a board that has insight and opinions, but that also has enough of the vision about where we are going that there won’t be constant conflict.

And then a constant state of communication is important. I’ve learned that trustees don’t like to be surprised, they like to be kept informed.

I’ve also found that individual time is important. So often, by the time we get to a trustee meeting, the meeting can look sort of perfunctory. That is because a fair amount of work has been done behind the scenes. Presidents who wait to work things out in trustee meetings are often surprised and disappointed at the outcomes. Trustees that have been properly dealt with before board meetings don’t mind perfunctory meetings because they know the work that has gone into it beforehand.



In conclusion, anything else you have learned?

One of the first lessons I learned was from Jack Zenger about strength-based leadership. This is the first lesson we share with our internal leadership group. This was such a great discovery for me as one who tends to fixate on my weaknesses and how I can fix and eradicate those. You need to understand that you can go to work on those weaknesses, and especially any fatal flaws, but you also need to find your strengths and appeal to them. This idea has been a great insight to me personally and has been well-received by our team.



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