



Leadership's delicate balance

A while back, I was chatting with a fellow college president as we walked across his campus. We had just enjoyed a wonderful chapel service. Of course, rather than discussing the splendor of the God whom we had just worshipped, we were going over our chapel budgets. "How many full-time people do you have on your chapel staff, Bill?" he asked. "Maybe one-and-a-half to two," I replied. You could have knocked him over with a feather. He knew our dean of the chapel, Terry McGonigal, was good, but he couldn't imagine how we could have such a robust spiritual life on campus with such a small staff. When I explained that most hours of direct ministry at Whitworth come through trained, paid student-ministry coordinators, he was stunned.

In this issue of *Whitworth Today*, we have put the magnifying glass on our very unusual student-leadership program. I'm sure there are many features that distinguish it from others, but over the years I have witnessed two aspects of the program that especially impress me.

First, our student-life staff believes that the best reason for hiring students in so many campus positions is not just for the benefits that student leaders get

from the experience; it's because students can do these jobs better than staff can. Certainly, the student leaders grow significantly in these positions, but they have their jobs because both research and experience argue that if properly trained and motivated, peers can outperform the rest of us in relation-based jobs. And that belief elevates dramatically the respect and expectations we hold for our student leaders.

Second, I'm impressed beyond words with the way student leaders respond to the paradoxes of their positions. When I do orientation with them, I always discuss how marginalized they will sometimes feel in their roles. They are a little different from most students because of those leadership roles. And they are a little different from the staff because of their student status. Yet these young people lead beautifully from the margin, seldom overplaying their hands and seldom forsaking their duties as leaders. They're remarkable.

I wrote a book that should be out any day now. In it I made the argument that 21st-century leaders will need to understand the paradoxes of their positions and be able to lead differently in different situations. When leaders find themselves at opposite poles of a paradox, they will need to lead in very different ways. I came to the conclusion that if there is a universal paradox in leadership, it grows out of the need people have for their leaders both to follow them and to lead them. There are situations that call for leaders to *represent* the desires of their people.

Leaders don't know everything and shouldn't pretend they do. But there are also times when leaders must *shape* the desires of their people. They have not been placed in positions of leadership in order to check the wind, then run out in front of the prevailing sentiment. "Leaders" who follow from the front of the pack are little more than vote counters. Interestingly, I find that when leaders do a good job of representing, they strengthen their ability to do the skillful work of shaping. They earn the power to lead by their willingness to listen and follow. A member of our cabinet once told me that someone had said I don't look very presidential or, for that matter, act very presidential. "Good," I thought to myself. "I'm building capital for when I need to *be* presidential."

Student leaders are cast into situations that demand them to develop leadership sensitivity. They must know when to be one of the gang and when to lead the gang. The measure of their peer influence is the product of this discernment. But adding significantly to this measure is a campus-wide awareness that we have a history of superb student leadership. And that history puts a helpful wind at the back of our student leaders.

We are being led by some remarkable students. I hope you enjoy learning about them in this issue of *Whitworth Today*.