

What Does It Mean to Be an Effective Leader and Program Administrator?

An Interview With Dr. John Shannon,
Dean of the Jannen School of Arts & Sciences
at Trine University in Northeast Indiana

Interview by Marina Cobb, marina.cobb@us.army.mil

I met Dr. John Shannon after he was selected to be the dean of the new Middle East School III at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). He struck me as someone whose always vibrant presence seemed to exude openness, optimism, and good intentions. It seemed that, in the eyes of the faculty, he epitomized enthusiasm and positivity. My first encounter with John was during an interview I conducted with him for the DLIFLC Re-Accreditation Self-Study Report in 2005. I was impressed by the conviction with which he spoke of many of his undertakings; it was obvious he was bringing his full commitment to new projects. I was later fortunate enough to work under his deanship in the new school for several months before he moved to his new position of dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at the Trine University in Indiana.

John was undoubtedly a progressive, open-minded leader and was someone whose leadership style I very much wanted to emulate. I was very interested in finding out what personal beliefs about leadership may have contributed to John being the type of leader that he is. The following is a summary of his answers to each of my questions.

Question 1. How would you describe the main characteristics of your leadership style?

John commented that he might not necessarily have the same perception of himself as a leader that others do, but was certainly happy to share what kind of leader he aspired to be. The first and foremost quality he consciously wished to cultivate in himself was being inclusive. He believes in shared governance for the simple reason that one has a better chance to succeed if more people participate in the decision-making process. He listed the following as characteristics of an effective leader (not necessarily provided in order of importance).

- *Understanding the big picture.* True leaders keep their eyes on the big picture and do not get “caught in the weeds.” They choose to give their time to areas where the truly important issues are.
- *Empowering others.* John commented that empowerment has unfortunately become somewhat of a buzzword; however, delegation combined with preparing people to succeed remains the core of true leadership. Delegation of

responsibilities goes hand-in-hand with willingness to give credit to others for a job well done.

- *Rewarding others.* Rewarding takes many forms, including a simple acknowledgment of the contributions. John pointed out that just the mere act of giving more responsibility can be a form of reward. In his words, empowerment is a bidirectional process of delegating and acknowledging the employees' contributions.

- *Communicating well.* John explained that by communicating well, he did not necessarily mean being articulate but rather saying what you mean and meaning what you say, without hidden agendas or ulterior motives.

- *Sharing information.* Leaders share information with those who need it. John recalled an incident when he was given advice by a senior colleague not to share his decision about which course of action he was going to take on a particular issue because he was told that knowledge is power and withholding information would give him power over others. John's response was that he was not interested in personal power but was very interested in enabling others to accomplish their responsibilities as efficiently and effectively as possible. John believes that providing information to others should not be used as a form of reward but rather as a tool to get things done because it allows them to make informed decisions.

- *Being transparent.* John shared his observation that it is hard for people to accept a decision that affects them directly when they do not understand how or why it was made in the first place. Inclusive leaders actively seek input and do not make decisions in a vacuum; they carry in them a sincere intention to take all input into account in the decision-making process.

- *Listening carefully.* John described listening carefully as a key component of effective communication and as an important characteristic of inclusive leaders. Being asked to give input that is not actually considered can be very frustrating for people. John pointed out how helpful it can be to let faculty members give their full input on an issue without saying much of anything in response; instead, just try to understand what their viewpoint on the issue actually is.

- *Taking responsibility.* Effective leaders take responsibility when something does not work, and then they make sure it gets done correctly the next time. A true leader would never leave a subordinate exposed or turn someone into a scapegoat. He or she holds people accountable while recognizing that the ultimate responsibility still lies with him or her.

- *Being respectful.* Effective leaders are always respectful, regardless of their position on the issue.

- *Keeping one's cool.* True leaders keep their cool under pressure and do not lose control of the situation or of themselves. In a difficult situation or when dealing with conflict, if the leader does not keep his or her cool, the other person cannot reasonably be expected to do it either. Because of the nature of their job, program leaders deal with stress all the time, not just in occasional situations. Having strategies for handling stress is imperative because without those strategies a leader cannot be maximally effective.
- *Engaging subordinates in solving their own problems.* When people ask the leader to solve a problem for them, it is a good idea to encourage them to work on it themselves first. People who find their own solutions have ownership of their decisions and are therefore more likely to succeed in implementing them
- *Truly caring.* Caring is a basic building block of leadership. It is not enough to genuinely want the program or department to improve; we must also demonstrate that we care. There are many ways to do this, such as by “simply being there” by attending a meeting or an event in which faculty members are participating when it is not necessary or expected that the leader will be there. Knowing that their supervisor was there to support them out of a genuine interest in what they were doing is a powerful motivator for employees. Other ways to show that you care include being available to hear about the employees’ problems, listening well, going to team and class functions of any scale, and putting in the time, that is, coming to work early and staying late.
- *Being enthusiastic.* A leader’s enthusiasm for the job rubs off on other people. Leaders set the tone for the whole group.

Question 2. Is there a program manager (or a leader in general) whom you consider(ed) to be your role model? What is it about this person's leadership style that impressed you the most? What did you want to emulate?

John commented that he always looks up to his own supervisors as role models, trying to learn from what he perceives as both their strengths and weaknesses. He recalled having a very supportive supervisor in recent years who was widely respected by subordinates because she was so supportive. He also recalled having a supervisor who was always generous in giving his time to faculty, but who was not the most tactful person. Another supervisor from his past was a model program-builder but neglected to nourish his relationships with subordinates, who at times felt demoralized despite the growth of their programs. Surprisingly, John explained that one of the most valuable role models he ever had was a person that he least wanted to emulate. This person taught him a lot about how not to be a leader. The experience of others is always valuable, and if we are observant, we can learn something from every person.

Question 3. Does supervising faculty from a different (non-Western) culture present additional challenges to you? Do you adjust your leadership and managerial

behaviors when the faculty you supervise come from a different (non-Western) culture? How?

John's professional experience spans several continents and many countries: Germany, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. He believes that the key to cross-cultural communication lies in listening well and showing a genuine interest in people, which means trying to learn about their lives, sharing experiences, and having a laugh together. There is no better way to break down barriers than to show a sincere appreciation of their culture.

When working with people from different cultural backgrounds, it may be especially important to explicitly state one's expectations because things taken for granted in one culture may be completely unknown in another. Making sure that the expectations are clear typically requires a lot of negotiating back and forth.

Question 4. What insights do you have for new or aspiring language program managers (e.g., advice, pitfalls to avoid, observations regarding mistakes new program managers are prone to making)?

John pointed out that there is really no substitute for experience, and that becoming a new program leader is not easy. With experience, what at first caused great anxiety may eventually become standard procedure. Asking for input and then listening carefully to it, especially when there is a need to make a decision that will affect others, is very important for new academic leaders. It is also important to rely on faculty to do their job, thus showing one's trust. A new manager might be inclined to feel responsible for everything; however, providing oversight does not entail telling everyone what to do. It entails being kept in the loop without interfering with or obstructing people from doing their job.

Also, it is essential to follow through on one's word: When leaders say that something is going to happen, they need to make sure that it does happen. Most important, success is predicated on hard work. If you just do your best every day, you will have no regrets in life. Sometimes you may feel that you did not make the best decision, but it helps to know that you did the best you could at the time.

One potential pitfall is for new leaders to assume that they will be able to continue doing things the way they had been done before, that is to say, the way they were done by the previous manager. Every situation is different, and each leader has to find his or her own way; there is no one shoe that fits all sizes here. However, new leaders who are set in their ways may also find that they are not a good fit within an institutional culture. The key question is whether or not the new program leader can adapt to and grow within the particular institution. The person may have strong ideas about what is right or wrong, and it is therefore extremely important that he or she does not make judgments before understanding the new setting. Sometimes leaders who assume that they will be doing things differently eventually come to realize that there are underlying reasons why things work the way they do in an organization. If this understanding helps the leader to adapt to

the setting, the “fit” will improve. If it does not help, the leader will probably have difficulties moving forward in the position.

In my observations of leaders, I have discovered that I find myself appreciating those who, like John, are business-like and focused on their work, yet exude warmth and genuine care for the people around them. I also admire leaders who appear to know when to go after their goals with full determination and when to set up their subordinates for success and step back, allowing their people to shine.

I see an important source of John’s long-term success as a program administrator in his personal optimism, inner strength, self-reflection, and a genuine need to provide personal and professional support to faculty. On behalf of the PAIS Newsletter editors, I express sincere gratitude to Dr. John Shannon for granting this interview.

***John Shannon** (PhD, The Ohio State University, MA, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale) is dean of the Jannen School of Arts & Sciences at Trine University in Northeast Indiana. He has previously served as dean of a large school of Arabic at the Defense Language Institute in California, spent 7 years directing the Intensive English Program at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tunisia. He has also been an active member of TESOL, giving 13 presentations at the annual convention and serving as chair-elect and chair of PAIS as well as on the TESOL Awards Committee. Last, he is a productive scholar, with nine publications and nine professional presentations in the past 4 years.*

***Marina Cobb** has taught both English and Russian as foreign languages and has served as department chair, faculty development specialist, and academic specialist at DLIFLC. She holds a BA in teaching EFL and a MATFL and is currently a doctoral student in learning and instruction at the University of San Francisco School of Education.*

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