

BYU - 2017 Administrator of the Year Speech

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Good evening. Let me begin by saying what an honor it is to be with you today. I took the opportunity to learn more about George Romney's life as well as the people you have honored in the past with this recognition and I am extremely grateful for this opportunity to be here with you.

The public and private nonprofit sectors are such an important part of our country's fabric. What the Romney Institute does to prepare young leaders to excel in this sector is impressive.

Consider that today, the private nonprofit sector employs over 12 million people – over 10% of our nation's workforce – contributing nearly a trillion dollars to the U.S. economy. Add in the public sector's 22 million jobs and you can see that the private nonprofit and public sectors have a huge impact on millions of lives in this country and around the world.

And it's why we need schools like BYU and programs like the Romney Institute that are committed to preparing young people for a career in either sector.

Back in 1981, before most of you were ever born, few of these programs existed. But I will tell you that jobs in this sector are harder now. The expectation from donors and taxpayers are higher, and so in that spirit, I would like to invoke one of the great thinkers of our time. When I was your age, I distinctly remember coming back to my dorm from the library and seeing a group of guys crowded around a TV set and listening to every word this person had to say. No, this was not a political leader, business leader or religious leader – it was none other than David Letterman. Dave used to have as a staple of his show, Dave's Top 10 List, where he would highlight 10 items around a common theme.

So, I'd like to share with you 10 things I've learned over the past 34 years of being in the nonprofit sector.

Here we go...

Top 10 words of advice for you as you embark on your career.

10. Answer The 'Why' Before The 'What'

If you are anything like I was when I was your age, the big question was what I am going to do with my life. I liked numbers more than words and the guidance counselor testing said I would be a good actuary...which I thought sounded fine until I learned what an actuary did. And then it wasn't so exciting.

When I graduated from high school, my Uncle Harold came up to me just like in the movie *The Graduate* and said I have one word for you....accounting. The world would always need accountants, so I became an accounting major. I was dealing with the “what” but I had not answered the question “why”.

And then a series of events occurred that really caused me to look even deeper than what I was going to do with my life from a vocational standpoint. I began asking why am I here? Who am I? What's the purpose of my life? And during my freshman year, I became a Christian and as I examined the Scriptures, I was surprised by how concerned God was for the poor, the sick, those in prison...in short, those who didn't enjoy all the benefits of life that I had experienced. And I also learned that there was a great expectation on those who had a lot. Of whom much is given, much is required. Once I answered the “why”, it became easier to answer the “what”.

9. Failure is Not an Option...or is it?

Does anyone remember where the first part of that line came from? It's from the movie *Apollo 13*. Astronauts were stranded in space and the crew on the ground had limited time and resources to figure out how to get them back to earth.

A few years ago at the Air Force Leadership Symposium, I had the privilege of speaking opposite Gene Krantz whose character was played by Ed Harris in the movie and “Failure is not an option” was the title of his talk. I was very disappointed because I wanted to hear his talk but I was also really concerned that of the 4,500 cadets present, I'd be speaking to the ten who were turned away because they ran out of seats to hear Gene! Fortunately for me, juniors and seniors had to listen to me where I proceeded to tell them the exact opposite... that failure was ok...that it was a part of life.

So, back to my story. Even though I felt I knew the “why”, I remained an accounting major in school, graduated with a degree in accounting and went to work as an accountant for the

Shell Oil Company. And I remember going to work one day and hearing a report from Gallup that said 70% of all Americans would change jobs and do something different if given the chance. And I remember thinking how sad that wasand then realizing I was one of those 70%!

So, through a series of events, at the age of 24, I became the executive director of the Houston-Galveston Area Foodbank. Now before you are too impressed, the food bank had been kicked out of the Second Harvest National Foodbank Association, shut down by the City of Houston health department, had no money and no food and I was going to be their third director in less than a year. At the age of 24 and knowing nothing about the food industry, hunger in Houston, warehousing, distribution, how to manage staff and volunteers, how to report to a board of directors...led me to the conclusion that even an experienced nonprofit leader would have a heck of a time pulling this organization out of the hole. All of which is to say that failure was not only an option, but likely.

I remember telling my parents what I was doing and, on the phone, there was a long silence. I remember taking my girlfriend out to the Food Bank which was in a really rough part of town. She thought I was crazy. Pay cut, no benefits, dangerous environment, I didn't know anything about how to run an organization...So, what's the worst thing that could happen? I could fail. I could get fired and then what would happen? Well, I'd have to likely go back to being a mediocre accountant or maybe the experience would help me in a less challenging nonprofit role. Either way, I was ok if that happened. And I think one of the challenges a lot of young people face is dealing with failure. It never occurs to them that this may not be for you or you're not good at it. Or external events conspire against you. You have to prepare yourself for the possibility that you may fail. And I would say that in an odd sort of way, knowing it was ok if I failed, I actually think I was a more realistic, balanced executive.

8. The Five P's

How do we do everything we can to prevent failure? The five P's. Proper preparation prevents poor performance. Life is about preparation. Does it look I am having a good time up here speaking to you? Does it look like I enjoy public speaking? Do I look nervous to you or do I look like I can't wait for this to be over? I started working on this talk 9 months ago. Why? Because I wanted to be prepared. This institution has given me a wonderful award in honor of a great man. How disrespectful would it be for me to just show and talk off the cuff without

any preparation? BYU has had a tradition of having great football teams. Those games aren't won on Saturdays. They are won in the weight room, studying film, working out during the off-season. Preparation is everything. And that is what BYU and the Romney Institute is all about. The administration and teachers are preparing you for a career in the nonprofit and public sector. Take full advantage of this time of preparation! I know too many people who are in a hurry to get to the next adventure. Now I appreciate a sense of urgency, but take time to be prepared.

7. Leaders Are Readers

When our kids were 12 and 14, we sent them to a program called SLU...Student Leadership University. It is a 4-year program. In year one, they came back from Orlando, Florida and of course, as a parent who just shelled out a ton of money sending them to this program, they probably hadn't even shut the car door when I said....ok guys, tell me what you learned.

Our daughter, Kate, immediately spoke up and said she learned two things. One was, whenever you have the opportunity to go to the bathroom, go. Seriously? We paid all this money for that? Now, actually as I have gotten older....it's really good advice.

But the second thing she learned was this.....Leaders are Readers. And I thought it was all worth it because both kids hated to read and from that time on, they became great readers and still are today. But what's the point? What happens when you read? You learn. Leaders are curious. They want to learn. If you want to lead, you need to be a life-long learner.

Finding the time is sometimes hard. For 34 years, I have listened to books on tape during my commute, so that every day I am learning for an hour to an hour and a half. I love biographies because you can learn about leaders

6. Be a Great Listener

I had a great example of being a good listener at a very young age. My grandfather was a milkman.

He was a wonderful grandfather but he was a terrible milkman. While other milkmen finished their route in the early afternoon, he was always late. Turns out there were a number of elderly, home-bound people on his route and he was often the only human interaction they

would have during the day. So he would take the time to have a cup of coffee with them and listen.

When I think about what I do during the course of any given day, it involves listening. So often the problems and the answers are right in front of us. And I will tell you, I have nixed many candidates for senior positions because I could tell they were not good listeners. They wanted to tell you their thoughts.

5. The Importance of Mentors

I already mentioned my grandfather but as I look back on my life, I had so many individuals who mentored me. Parents, relatives, coaches, teachers. I've had a lot of them, but one area where I was particularly blessed and yet it is one of the most challenging aspects of being a leader in the nonprofit sector is reporting to a board of directors.

Given that I have reported to a board since 1983, I recently calculated, because of board term limits, that I have reported to and been evaluated by nearly 500 board members over those 34 years.

Here is what I've observed. Leadership comes in many flavors. It's not always charismatic. I've learned that I can learn just as much from a bad example in leadership as I can from a good example. I've learned that just about everyone does at least one thing really well and most of us have a blind spot or two. Finally, I've learned that some of the very best leaders I've ever met and worked with are some of the kindest, most humble people I know. Those people have included four star generals and CEO's of big companies. It's easy to make the mistake that great leaders are larger than life. Most are not. They care, they're committed to their profession, and they go the extra mile.

My advice to you is to seek out mentors. Ask their advice. Watch what they do.

One of our board members was a writer for Sports Illustrated and he was assigned to write a story about an old man who was mentoring a young African-American basketball player. The old man was 85 year old John Wooden, the greatest college basketball coach who ever lived and the young African-American player was Shaquille O'Neal who was playing with the Los Angeles Lakers.

As my friend was interviewing both individuals, he made the comment to Coach Wooden, “Boy, you must get a lot of requests to mentor people.” Coach Wooden’s response was, “Not as many as you might think.” Two weeks later my friend called Coach Wooden and asked if he would be his mentor. Coach Wooden’s reply was, “I’ve been waiting for your call.” For the next 10 years, they met regularly and my friend eventually took Coach Wooden’s counsel and together they wrote a book. My point – you need to ask – no one is too old to be mentored, or to be a mentor.

4. Make the Decision Today to Work Harder

Now, as everyone here knows, it’s not that simple. But too often we focus on people like Bill Gates being brilliant and demanding when he started Microsoft and we either don’t know or minimize the fact that by the time he graduated from high school, he had spent as much time programming software as the most senior IBM programmer at the time.

I was the first kid in my immediate family to graduate from college. I went to a small state school in rural Pennsylvania. The three institutions I eventually went to work for didn’t even exist when I was your age.

My point is that hard work can overcome a lot. In golf, there is a term for a person who isn’t flashy but just keeps at it. That person is a grinder. I have no doubt there are some brilliant minds in this room but for those of us who are not, I would encourage you to go the extra mile.

3. Time Management

Growing up, I always had a job, sometimes two, and I was always playing a sport and not because I was thinking about the future. I wanted to earn some extra money and I loved sports. In college, I played all four years on my college tennis team and also had a job.

The good habits you form today will help you more than you know in the future.

I am a bit fanatical when it comes to my time. I always plan out my day. I always have a list of things I need to do. It’s all part of an effort to utilize my time well.

We are all given the same number of hours in a day. If you want to be an effective leader, a good spouse, a good mom or dad, son or daughter and be in good shape physically, emotionally and spiritually, you have to commit to managing your time as best as you can.

2. Figure Out What Melts Your Butter

I was interviewing for a position with Habitat for Humanity and meeting with Habitat's founder. He said, "David, I have a question for you."

What melts your butter? What do you get excited or passionate about?

My great, great grandfather William Williams died in a coal mining accident in 1879. My grandfather, Anthony Zeto lost a leg in a coal mining accident in 1933 and died of black lung. They did not have nearly the options I have had and that you have today.

Here is why this is important. I spend a lot of time doing what I do. But I love what I do. I love it because I know why I do it. There is no reason in this country and with your education that you should not be able to work at a job that melts your butter.

It doesn't mean it will be easy. In fact, it will likely be harder because if you have a passion for your work, you will care more and want to do everything possible to succeed.

And finally, number 1.

1. Serve

I'll end with a quote I've always loved from Martin Luther King, Jr. that I think is so appropriate for anyone considering a career in the public or nonprofit sector.

"Everybody can be great.

Because everybody can serve.

You don't have to have a college degree to serve.

You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve...

You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace.

A soul generated by love.

Working in the public or nonprofit sector can be one of the most fulfilling careers ever imagined. Leadership is about serving. Serving the people around you. Serving the institution that allows you to feed your family. If you have a servant leadership mindset, people will follow you. There is an old African proverb that says if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. I hope you go far.

So to Summarize...

Know your “Why”,

Have a proper perspective regarding failure,

Be prepared,

Work hard,

Find mentors,

Manage your time,

Read,

Be a good listener and,

Figure out what melts your butter.

Many leaders in the public and nonprofit sectors are going to retire over the next 10 years.

We will need smart, dedicated, passionate leaders. I look forward to seeing what you will do as you take up your mantle of leadership.

Thank you.