The Trust Factor: How it Affects Leadership

By Gregory Gray, Chancellor

This month I want to examine one of the major obstacles to sound leadership: a lack of trust. I have observed this phenomenon in my career and intellectual travels across our country’s higher education landscape, and in California I have found that the “trust factor” certainly plays a significant role in academia, not to mention politics. Some of today’s great leadership pundits, including authors like Jack Welsh and Jim Collins, appreciate the futility of leadership without trust. The issue is simple. Without trust, effective leadership is not possible.

In the most recent ACE Forum for the Future of Higher Education, Professor Harry Brighouse, a noted political philosopher at the University of Wisconsin, discusses “Ethical Leadership in Hard Times: The Moral Demands on Universities.” In examining the cultural collision of business practices and academic culture, Brighouse writes, “Efficiency is not an enemy of ethics. Efficiency enhances our ability to do good…when it is turned to the advancement of the right mission.”

The September 24 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education included an article by Richard Ekman, president of the Council of Independent Colleges, which centered on what Ekman sees as an imminent crisis in college leadership. His concern is that higher education will become an industry that is led by individuals who view it as a
commodity to be traded, a production problem to be solved efficiently, or a brand to be marketed.

It is not hard to understand Mr. Ekman’s concerns. One simply has to look at the recent uproar about practices at many for-profit colleges. These institutions provide huge financial aid packages to students, often sealing the “deal” with a guarantee of a job upon completion. It’s a very efficient business sales model. But the frequent disconnect between the promise and the reality—for-profit graduates in debt and unemployed—eroses trust.

Yet, just as all academic practices are not inherently good, all business practices are not inherently bad.

One of the answers, I believe, lies in Brighouse’s premise of “the right mission.” Defining that requires leadership—on the part of administrators, faculty, staff, and students.

**What Makes a Good Leader?**

I once read that a good leader is a person you would follow to a place you wouldn’t want to go yourself. Without trust, that doesn’t happen.

Trust, like respect, is earned. This is a very timely concept as we observe the heated debates leading up to next Tuesday’s elections.

Which candidate is to be believed and therefore deserving of our vote and confidence as a leader? You already know my answer: the best leader.

What is true for California is also true for RCCD.

RCCD and our colleges deserve leaders who are strong enough to resist the temptation to give in to political, social, or special interest group pressure simply in order to garner support, popularity or votes. If we truly have a transparent organizational structure (which I believe RCCD has), then there will be a great deal of debate and consideration about directions, goals, and objectives. That give-and-take should define us, and our leaders must be able to articulate difficult solutions to complicated programs.

Good leadership simply does not offer a glib 30-second sound bite more suited to a Madison Avenue advertising campaign than to an institution of higher learning. Good leaders recognize the reality of a situation. More importantly, good leaders are able to define that reality for the people they lead.

I believe we all understand the basics of our reality given the economic and political condition of California. What we need are leaders at every level of our district and colleges who provide us with good decision making.

Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric, says that a good leader has energy, energizes the people he or she leads, provides the competitive edge necessary for everyone’s success, and is able to execute the organization’s overarching plan.

With the education crisis in this country and, particularly, in California and Riverside County, our educational leaders must provide new and innovative ways for students to be successful. This cannot be achieved through popularity contests, or by individuals seeking elected office who are stuck in a by-gone era or have no idea what education is all about. We need to move in new directions, and we need leaders who are willing and able to take us into the future.

Being in a college environment allows us the unique opportunity presented by participatory governance. In a true sense each of us is a leader.

**A Measure of Trust & Skepticism**

I believe that good leadership is critical if we are to take our colleges from being good to being great. Without good, capable, strong, and knowledgeable leaders who are able to “stand on their own two feet,” the educational improvements that we all seek for our colleges simply will not happen. Therefore, I ask that we question our leaders when we do not agree with them—even disagree with them if we are not sure about the soundness of their positions. But I also ask that we approach these discussions with collegiality and a basic level of trust.

If we abandon trust, if we are unable to preserve an environment of trust tempered by reasoned skepticism, then all the leadership courses and mega personalities in the world will never coalesce into the type of leadership our district and communities need and deserve.

Our hope is to grow leaders and in the process see our colleges grow to the height of greatness.