

**“Leadership”**  
**Remarks by Ambassador Linton Brooks**  
**Before the DOE EEO, Diversity and Human Resources Conference**  
**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

**July 2, 2004**

Thank you. The first thing I want to do is bring greetings from both Secretary Abraham and Deputy Secretary McSlarrow. As all of you know, they are strong champions of diversity, of equal opportunity, and of helping all our employees achieve their potential.

This is going to be a somewhat different presentation than you expect. Today marks the fortieth anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which did so much to move us toward equality in the work place. On such a day, you might expect a formal speech, replete with references to the importance of diversity and of equal opportunity. But you already know all that, and if our actions haven't convinced you that the Department leadership knows it too, a short speech isn't going to help.

Since you are human resources professionals, I might talk of the importance of new tools to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century HR challenge. How do we use succession planning and new approaches to hiring and traditional tools to provide the flexibility that modern management demands and our work force deserves? But once again, you know more about the topic than I do and the excellent workshops you've already had have allowed you to wrestle with the specifics.

So, instead of giving either of those speeches, I just want to talk with you a little bit. What I want to talk about is leadership. I think that things we do in the name of diversity or human resources management often are simply forms of leadership. After all, if we were all the same gender, the same race, and the same ethnicity, we'd still want to treat every individual with dignity. We'd still place a premium on integrity. We'd still want to foster good, two-way communications. Let me give you a very practical example. You've been kind enough to cite my Lintgrams as an example of a diversity best practice. But it never occurred to me they had anything to do with diversity. I thought of them – and still think of them – as a tool of leadership. So leadership is what I'd like to discuss this morning.

Why talk to this particular group about leadership? Many of you have staff rather than line responsibilities. If you are in charge of things, it's of small offices, not vast enterprises. But it seems to me that that's precisely where leadership is most important. You both demonstrate leadership yourself and advise those with formal leadership responsibilities. Don't confuse leadership with formal responsibility. A leader is one who has followers, which means everyone here should aspire to be a leader. Besides, if I'm right that the goals of diversity, equal opportunity, and human dignity are the same as the goals of good leadership, then leadership is the only thing we should be talking about.

Let me clear away two things at the beginning. I'm not going to talk about management. I come out of a culture in which you manage resources but you lead people. Management is an

important skill, but those who are managers only, and not leaders, are always going to be of limited effectiveness.

The second thing I want to get out of the way is the idea that leadership is something that is inherent in who you are and can't be taught or acquired. That's not completely wrong. Just as some people are born with great athletic skills, some people are, by personality, more likely to develop into charismatic leaders. But even the best natural athlete must practice to refine his or her skills. So too must the so-called natural leader. And just as any individual can become a significantly better athlete through training and practice, so any individual can become a significantly better leader in the same way. So it seems to me worthwhile to think a little bit about how we become more effective leaders.

The historian Douglas Southall Freeman wrote *Lee's Lieutenants*, a famous study of leadership in combat. After spending a lifetime thinking about what made great leaders he distilled his thoughts into three principles: be a man; know your stuff; and take care of your men. Freeman was writing decades ago about 19<sup>th</sup> century warfare, then an inherently male profession. If he were writing today, he'd have the same three principles but he'd phrase them differently. He would say: be a person of honor and integrity; know your stuff; and take care of your people. So I'd like to build on that a little bit and talk about what those principles might tell us about leadership.

### **Be a person of honor and integrity**

This is clearly the most important aspect of leadership. There are obviously leaders who don't have honor and integrity, but, in the long run, they fail. What does it mean to be a person of honor and integrity?

First, it means that you are candid and honest and that people can rely on the truth of what you say. If you always tell the truth, you never have to remember what you said. But integrity means more than simply telling the truth when asked. It also means telling the truth when people need to know it even if they haven't asked and aren't aware of the problem.

Second, being a person of honor and integrity – of character, if you will – means treating people with kindness, compassion, civility, and respect. And that means all people. The individual who is polite to the Secretary to the Energy and abusive to the security guard is neither a nice person nor a leader.

Third, a person of honor and integrity is willing to act if it is their responsibility to do so. This is easy to advocate, but sometimes hard to do. The temptation to put off hard decisions is very strong. But decisions don't get any easier by being delayed. Acting doesn't mean doing what is popular, it means doing what is right. Perhaps no trait is more important in a leader than the constant willingness to ask what is the right thing to do. I can speak from personal experience that unpopular decisions are easier to sustain if you know that you're right.

### **Know your stuff**

Leadership is not abstract. We lead particular people doing a particular mission under a particular set of circumstances. Those of you in this room are specialists. You need to be expert in your own discipline. Continued study and growth are important parts of making you effective. Indeed, a conference like this exists to help you grow in your profession.

But you need more than knowledge of the specific disciplines associated with human relations. You, and the people you advise, need to understand the mission of the larger organization. You can't lead people if you don't know what they are doing. The more you understand what people do and the conditions under which they must do it, the more effective leader you will be. The more you understand the sense of mission that inspires many of our people, the more you will be able to help direct that sense of mission in appropriate ways. The more you understand the hopes and fears of individuals, the better you will be able to direct your specific expertise to helping each of those individuals reach their maximum potential.

Above all, you need a vision of what you personally are doing and how it fits into the organization. Why will the organization be better for your having been here? Visions energize people. They also help you understand what is important. It has been said that the commonest form of stupidity is forgetting what you are trying to do. Knowing your stuff means having a vision of what you and those you lead are trying to accomplish.

### **Take care of your people.**

Nothing is as simple to say as "take care of your people." But, for many, it's difficult to put into practice. Taking care of people means making sure they have what they need to do the job. That doesn't just mean tools, equipment, and money. It also means information and support. If you know things that would help others do their job, you have an affirmative obligation to make sure they know those things as well. And that's a very broad obligation. It's wrong to assume that an individual may not need specific information to do a narrowly defined job. Everybody works better when he or she can see the big picture and where the organization is going. Those who hoard information from their subordinates because knowledge is power and they want to retain power may have big titles, but they aren't leaders.

Taking care of your people means giving them credit and absorbing blame. In most organizations, most good ideas come from the people who actually do the job. Too often, those ideas are stifled by more senior people who can't deal with the fact that their subordinates have better ideas than they do. Steve Hafner, who runs the organization that transports nuclear weapons and materials, has a saying "Only inferior leaders are threatened by the good ideas of their subordinates." He's right. There's no end to the good a person can do if he doesn't care who gets the credit. Leaders aren't threatened by good ideas, no matter where they come from. Instead that revel in the chance to brag about the good ideas of their subordinates.

Taking care of your people also means sheltering them from undeserved blame. I don't mean that people should not be held accountable. It is unfair to good performers not to try and correct poor performance. But honest errors in judgment will occur. The only way to avoid

mistakes is to do nothing. If you want people who will try to make things better, you have to protect them when they try and fail.

Above all, taking care of people means never trying to deflect responsibility that is yours onto your subordinates. The person who tries to evade responsibility for a mistake he made by passing it off to a subordinate may be many things, but he will never be a leader.

### **So what?**

If we are to grow as leaders, we need to constantly challenge ourselves. If you don't like the particular approach to leadership I have been describing, then you should find another that fits your personality. Leadership is not a one-size-fits-all business.

But suppose you do like what I have said. What do we do about it? If you recognize yourself in the description I have given, then the answer is simple. You keep practicing. Our moral muscles, like our physical ones, atrophy if they are not used. But suppose you would like to be the kind of person I'm describing, but you know you fall short. Most of us do. What do you do then?

I think what you do is simply act as though you already were the kind of person that I have been describing. If acting with integrity, even when it's unpopular, doesn't come naturally to you, do it anyway. If you're not really sure whether you're interested in what the people in the organizations you help lead do on a day-to-day basis, find out anyway. If encouraging new ideas from a subordinate feels threatening to you, do it anyway. C. S. Lewis, the renaissance scholar and Christian apologist, once wrote, "Men become what they pretend to be." He's right. So pretend to be the kind of leader that you want to be, and gradually you'll become that kind of leader. In my view, you will also become a better human being, which is not a bad bonus.

All of us in this room have the opportunity to be leaders, but so do many others. What makes us unusual is that we get to practice a special kind of leadership: leadership in public service. As the President has said, all of us in this room are in service of something larger than ourselves; we are in the service of the greatest country in the history of the world. I urge you never to forget what a privilege this is. Not everyone gets to make a difference. We do. Not everyone gets to have a life that matters. We do. Not everyone gets to nurture the next generation of leaders. We do. Never forget what an honor that is.

Everything we accomplish is done through people. Helping those people excel is the essence of leadership. So I urge you not to think of yourselves primarily as managing human resources, enforcing equal opportunity, or promoting diversity. Instead, think of yourselves as leaders, as advisors to leaders, and as nurturers of future leaders. If you do, diversity, equal opportunity, and exceptional management will follow and, more importantly, the Department will be better able to carry out its mission of service to this wonderful country of ours.

Thank you for your attention.