What Failure Can Teach About Leadership

“We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are.”
— Maya Angelou

Failure is a big part of leadership. Sometimes we fail through our own ignorance. Sometimes failure is a result of taking on a task that is just too big for anyone. And of course, we know that there are many people who hope we will fail.

I am no stranger to failure, but as Maya Angelou reminds us, we must not be defeated.

About a year ago, I asked our university community to develop a charge to do what no other higher education institution has done: to transform into reality the vision of our campus community as a just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive center of learning, where all community members grow, learn, and contribute to the greater good. As a result of many community conversations, a President’s Commission on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) was developed. We knew the first year of the project would be messy, but we acknowledged that we were in this for the long haul despite the inevitable challenges we would face.

Indeed, the power of the Commission members’ work lay deep in the messiness that we often try to avoid. This was a significant failure for me: the charge for the Commission did not allow adequate opportunities for community members to properly grapple with this messiness.

The lessons I learned from this failure—or as Angelou puts it, defeat—were far-reaching. As a result, I know better who I am. I know what I need to rise from, and I know the steps I need to take to go further.

First, campus communities need to provide ways to facilitate seemingly impossible conversations—the dialogue that people often shy away from out of fear they will say the wrong thing, offend someone, or express vulnerability. One of the great challenges we face as a society is our reluctance to “call in” as well as “call out.” While I hope we continue to “call out” actions or words that are unacceptable, I hope we will also “call in” actions or words that we find desirable. Respect is a core value at many higher education institutions, including Arcadia, and I hope we can continue to nurture our work together through our intersectionality and differences.

Second, the JEDI Commission meetings served as building blocks for a community of practice. We have learned so much from our JEDI experience. Too often, we fail to engage in soul-centric reflection and critique—exercises that develop a sense of cultural humility that can unearth our individual and collective responsibilities related to racism. As we at Arcadia think about the next iteration of the JEDI commission, we need to have a community of practice at the core of our work. For example, more student voices are essential, as this initiative is contingent on a community-wide effort.

Third, as a university president with multiple identities, one of which is Asian American, I am particularly sensitive to the traps that pit marginalized groups against one another. We must craft solidarities as people of color and stay vigilant about these traps because they allow people and institutions to avoid responsibility for addressing racism or the damage it continues to inflict. And all our community members, including me, must do the personal work required to disrupt anti-Black racism.

Fourth, this work requires a difficult balance in order to address the tension between urgent change and systemic, structural, and sustainable change. This tension is not always readily apparent to our stakeholders. We must do our best to advance our work within the stipulated deadlines while practicing our community values.

Fifth, although our vision of radical change at Arcadia University is still within reach, we must consider how this work is informed at the personal, institutional, and societal levels in order to succeed. We are developing a framework that will counter unfairness and inequity by pushing community
members to take the following steps: examine their own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as a way to help disrupt injustice; investigate the root causes of social issues, including an analysis of intersecting injustices involving people, policies, practices, curricula, organizations, and the institution; facilitate a community of practice so that we can provide a sense of belonging for all community members; and support community members, organizations, and groups that are most vulnerable to injustices. Ultimately, our goal is to provide freedom and liberation to all our community members.

Finally, we must turn our words into action. Despite the challenges we have faced, the JEDI Commission has made significant progress in developing a theory of change to guide our actions, producing a plan to create a database of current JEDI-related programs and activities (including relevant research projects that are in progress as well as courses that focus on JEDI-related topics), and identifying a menu of available data that are relevant to the work of the Commission, along with compiled and coded focus group data from the past few years. This progress will help suggest benchmarks and targets to measure institutional effectiveness.

Ultimately, my leadership failure was an opportunity for me to better understand the kind of work that will be necessary for us to fully lean into systemic change at Arcadia. After the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, I facilitated a conversation with the Commission members. We shared our desire to seek positive transformation in our community, particularly to improve the experience of students of color at Arcadia and to address anti-Black racism. Participating in this conversation was awe-inspiring. We must do this every single day to change the course of history. This is the space I should have created from the very beginning.

No matter how difficult and challenging our work has been, I am proud of how much we have learned this past year and of where we are headed next.

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