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Article: **Christian Leadership**

Networking, border crossing and staying on pitch

L. Gregory Jones reflects on three essential qualities of leadership needed in the 21st century.

by **L. Gregory Jones**

January 4, 2011

Editor's note: L. Gregory Jones spoke Nov. 20, 2010, during the commencement ceremony for the Global Executive MBA program at the Fuqua School of Business. This address easily adapts to the challenges and opportunities facing Christian institutional leaders, as noted in the links provided in the piece.

What I want to do is to reflect with you about the kind of education that the world needs in the 21st century and actually what are the most essential of the qualities of leadership regardless of the organizations you are part of or entrusted to lead. I want to give you three brief images on which you can hang your hat, drawn from a surprising convergence in recent writings about innovation and leadership. The first is networking, the second is border crossing and the third is staying on pitch.

First, networking. The image of being a networker in many ways conjures up images of those rather slimy people you want to avoid at a cocktail party -- the people who, as soon as they come up and introduce themselves and tell you their great accomplishments, are looking over your shoulder to see if there's somebody more important they might be able to meet very quickly thereafter. I want to redeem the image of being a networker in at least one sense.

Networking in its best sense is what it means when you connect people in new ways that make innovation and experimentation possible. I want to use an image from Steven Johnson's latest book, "Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation." Johnson paints a picture of Charles Darwin, on a calm day in 1836 on the Keeling Islands, going out to a coral reef and finding in that coral reef an extraordinary constellation of life. Darwin noticed that in areas of the water not too far from that coral reef, there was no life at all. When he went back onto dry land on the Keeling Islands, he found very little life there either. What he

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recognized was that there was a constellation of networks that actually made life rich -- able to multiply and to discover new possibilities. Networking creates what Johnson calls "adjacent possibles."

Johnson suggests that it's about people coming together who otherwise wouldn't know each other and then seeing the ideas, the relationships, the questions, the disagreements, the ways in which people press against each other and with each other, spend late nights wondering with each other, and early mornings sometimes apologizing to each other. It's the sheer journey.

But networkers in this sense are people who make more life possible because the connections are both broad and deep. Those networks have been extended and expanded by technology, and Fuqua's pioneering work of place and space education brings together in the most dynamic pedagogical way I know of, on the one hand, face-to-face interaction, the embodied ways in which you get close enough to each other and to particular cultures to get a sense of the smells and the ways in which people's movements affect you and sometimes stimulate you and sometimes annoy you, and, on the other hand, networks of technology that supplement that capacity, which means that you have to wake up early in the morning or somebody else has to stay up late at night to converse, where being involved in a global program you discover that you get as many e-mails while you're asleep as you do while you're awake.

The networks multiply the possibilities for relationship; and the times of renewing them in embodied interaction, supplemented with technological interaction, provide an explosion of possibility, or what Clay Shirky calls "cognitive surplus." That's where innovation, new ideas, new ways of thinking about your current work, new opportunities explode.

Two quick images. One, Johnson describes a recent study by McGill University researchers who actually put cameras in laboratories of individual scientists, molecular biologists, and then they had cameras in the rooms where the scientists would gather to engage in discussion about their science. What they discovered was that the genuine breakthroughs consistently happened not as the scientists themselves thought, working in the labs, but consistently around the conference rooms as they talked about what they were learning.

It was simply the most recent example of what Randall Collins found in his study "The Sociology of Philosophies," a big-sounding big book that's not worth reading except the conclusive finding: that intellectual breakthroughs across the history of the world, across cultures around the world, consistently have depended upon sustained relationships of people from diverse backgrounds interacting with one another over time.

But there's a problem. In this world of the Internet and networks of relationships, it's also now increasingly possible for us not to be like Darwin's coral reef but to be of a different kind of animal species, the one known as birds of a feather, liking to flock together. The potential of these kinds of networks we now can create means we also can find ourselves creating only networks with like-minded people whom we already agree with and who will reinforce our own sentiments and prejudices, likes and dislikes.

Cass Sunstein's recent book "Going to Extremes" actually suggests the problem we have in what he calls an architecture of control with the Internet and with media now, where we can go just to the places we want to go, which explains the persistence of people who believe, for example, that Obama was not born in the United States,, because people operate only within their own confined network. Their positions actually harden and become more extreme. And so the second image is border crossing. We need leaders who are willing to cross borders.

Crossing borders means entering into a new place geographically and becoming embedded there and actually trying to get a sense of what it's like to spend time there and to learn the culture -- not simply going and trying to find a way to float through as if you had never passed through immigration at all. Crossing borders is about sustaining an appreciation for this world's wondrous diversity of cultures, their complexity, the histories that have brought them to this place, the ways in which that raises new questions for you and provides new opportunities.

But the border crossing is not only geographical. It's also intellectual. It's the ways in which you move beyond the narrow confines of business to understand the larger context of a culture. What is it that makes it live and breathe? What are the histories that have brought it to where it is? What are its hopes and fears? What are its trajectories?

I had the joy of spending some time with you all in Shanghai and Singapore. Remember that remarkable presentation by David Michael from BCG? It was really a wonderfully complex storytelling exercise of a portrait of three different people -- one, a family -- but people who have experienced changes in the new China. It had significant business implications as he talked about the kinds of goods that they would purchase in moving from rural to urban China. But more than that, it was a way of understanding whole ways of life and the implications of that.

Or when we went to Gensler and watched their exhibits of architecture. As someone who had trouble getting Legos to ever go higher than three blocks, I was astounded at the mere thought of the construction of the world's second highest building, and the guy that we just happened to have walking by step in and talk about how thrilling it was to design. The kind of border crossing that asks the questions of architecture and the questions of what it means for a family to move from rural to urban China, replicated in each culture in which you go -- that's the kind of knowledge the world needs.

We need border crossers in business, in politics, in civic life -- across the board. It'll only happen if you maintain those networks of relationships, if when you hear about something happening in another part of the world you seek out from one of your classmates or perhaps from one of the magazines or newspapers you learned to read while you were within that culture the different perspective that they raise on that particular issue -- if you learn to ask questions, to read widely, to engage people across cultural divides.

The kind of border crossers that I'm thinking of are both people who have become ordinary leaders within local communities and people who have taken extraordinary risks, like a Nelson Mandela or a Deng Xiaoping or an Abraham Lincoln. It's the kind of hard work that you do even when you don't really want to do it.

A wonderful image from a Welsh poet about forgiveness applies to the kind of leadership I hope you'll provide. If you just substitute the word "leadership" for his use of the word "forgiveness" -- he says, "Forgiveness is walking through thorns to stand by your enemy's side." That's what leadership is -- being willing to cross borders to those who are different, those who have been constructed as enemies or those who've just been constructed as people who think differently. The only way in which networking will really be transformative for the world is if it's also linked to the kind of border crossing that you have done so well in GEMBA.

The third image is staying on pitch. Now, staying on pitch, in part, is just a way of saying that it's important that we be in tune and in harmony and connected in important ways. Two of my children are singers. It seems to have skipped a generation, because no one lets me sing in public, or private. But staying on pitch is a way of saying that the kind of diversity that exists in your class provides a harmony that the world really needs, a harmony that includes people who sing the dissonant notes at times but also overall produce the symphony.

But there's a second reason for using that image. It's a mnemonic device, because I want to suggest to you that staying on pitch is ultimately about being people of character. I want to suggest very briefly five virtues that are important for the kind of leadership that I'm trying to describe.

The P is perseverance. I'm speaking to the choir here. If you all could survive the last 18 months of travel to all the cities, continuing to work in your jobs, managing your home life and personal relationships, all the assignments, and still show up here, walking unaided into the room, I suspect perseverance is not a virtue in small supply. But, as Scott Belsky has noted in his book "Making Ideas Happen," the problem the world faces with innovation is not creative ideas. Creative ideas are a dime a dozen. The problem is the perseverance to enable those creative ideas to actually make it all the way to implementation -- so perseverance.

The I is interpretive charity. Interpretive charity is a way of engaging any culture or any person different from you, to start with a default assumption that they mean well, to interpret what they say in the best possible light, even if -- especially if -- it seems absurd at first. Because often you can find there's a reason why they think that way, and maybe if you probe enough and listen attentively enough, you'll discover something compelling about it. It doesn't mean that you'll necessarily agree, but it does mean that your default is always to listen, to learn, to interpret charitably. It's part of what it means to be embedded, to learn another culture, to listen -- interpretive charity.

The T is pretty straightforward -- truthfulness. Leaders are only as good as our word, and if you aren't

truthful, people will learn and know it pretty quickly and not want to be around you. Enough said.

The C is courage. To be the kind of networker and the kind of border crosser that I've been describing, to have that interpretive charity, to persevere, it takes courage. It takes a willingness to keep going even when you are exhausted. A friend of mine ran an ultramarathon in South Africa. It was a 60-mile race. He was 55 years old at the time. He was just trying to do it, have a sense of perseverance. About mile 43 he was about to give up, and then two little old ladies on the side of the road pointed over toward him and said, "That one'll never make it." It was all it took to get him the last 17 miles. Courage is what gets you that last 17 miles, what helps you to persevere.

The H is humility. Humility is not a false sense of who you are. It's not a sense of humiliation. It's simply a recognition that no matter what you've achieved, no matter how far you've come, there's always more to learn, there's always more to do, there's always somebody else who can help you grow and make you a better person.

PITCH -- perseverance, interpretive charity, truthfulness, courage, humility. If you stay on pitch, you'll have the kind of character the world needs.

I want to leave you with one final image. It comes from a high school football team in Baltimore. It's written about in a little book by journalist Jeffrey Marx called "Season of Life." Marx was perplexed, because he had heard it's an unusual football team. He went to visit it. It's one of the best teams on the East Coast of the United States. But when he went to practice, he found out that the coaches had a group of people who were a strange constellation. There were some of the poorest kids from Baltimore and some of the wealthiest kids from Baltimore. It's a private school.

And the coaches began practice by saying, "What's our job as coaches?" And the players all said, "To love us." And the coaches then said, "And what's your job as players?" And they said, "To love each other." And the journalist thought, "This is just bizarre." And then they started practicing, and he saw how good they were at their teamwork. One of the mothers came up to the coach at the end of the pre-season, and she said to the coach, "How do you think the boys are going to do?" And the coach said, "I don't think we'll know for probably 10 years." She wanted to know their win-loss record. He was saying, "We've been in this because we're concerned about shaping character for the long term."

I hope you will understand and recognize that the real test of your leadership will not be today or tomorrow, but 10 years from now. You can cultivate a transformative leadership by developing networks, crossing borders and staying on pitch -- and, in so doing, contribute to the beauty and wisdom our world desperately needs.