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Talking Leadership

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Talking Leadership

 udayton.edu/blogs/president/2018/02/flyer_enterprises.php



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By Eric F. Spina

What makes a great leader? I'd put my money on Stephanie Bennett and her team.

As CEO of Flyer Enterprises, one of the largest student-run businesses in the country, Stephanie exudes confidence and a can-do spirit. Those are traits found throughout her executive team — fellow undergraduates who help her oversee 10 divisions in a \$1.2 million company. Many of them rose up through the ranks as baristas at one of the coffee divisions or, in Stephanie's case, an ice cream buyer at The Galley.

I'm thoroughly convinced that these are the world's next leaders. Their passion and sense of purpose are contagious. I also recognize that we have such strong student leaders — and opportunities for leadership development — across the University, whether ETHOS, Flyer Consulting, BATU, Habitat for Humanity, the many organizations associated with the Center for Social Concern, and so many others.

As Stephanie grooms Jon Allen to replace her as CEO when she graduates in May and joins Ford Motor Co. as a zone manager, we sat down in my office and talked about her leadership philosophy. She learned to be a leader by doing, illustrating the value of experiential education that we espouse at UD. I learned by doing, too — over two decades in leadership positions in higher education.

It's uncanny how our philosophy of what makes an effective leader meshes.

"I have a collaborative leadership style," she told me. "I try to be as open and transparent as possible. I try to blend both hands-on and hands-off leadership styles."

For me, I try to listen to all perspectives, be collaborative, and provide a strong rationale for decisions. I'm never going to be as knowledgeable about details in my direct reports' areas of responsibility as they are, but I don't have to be. I think that good leaders find good people, focus them on the importance of collaboration to advance the entire organization (and not just their respective "silos"), empower them, set expectations, and clear the path for them to succeed.

That's what Stephanie does. "I now have the ability to work effectively with other people, and not just people my age. I've learned how to give feedback correctly and when to delegate," she said.

On my own journey in leadership, I've discovered it's important to encourage others to think boldly, yet consider all factors — and long-term impact — when making decisions.

Stephanie has already learned that lesson: "I want the company's executives to explore their own ideas. I want every idea explored," she said. "I have tried to facilitate this kind of culture within Flyer Enterprises. That attitude leads to innovation within the organization."

I certainly wish I had such a rich and valuable experience when I was in college.

As I listened to Stephanie talk, it struck me that Flyer Enterprises is more than a company. It's a one-of-a-kind laboratory for learning the lessons of leadership.