



CPAP

Roundtable on Leadership & Administration

Center for Public Administration & Policy
School of Public & International Affairs
Virginia Tech University

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CPAP Faculty

John Dickey, Professor Emeritus
Larkin Dudley, Associate Professor
Matthew Dull, Assistant Professor
Angela Eikenberry, Assistant Professor
Charles Goodsell, Professor Emeritus
Karen Hult, Professor
Laura Jensen, Associate Professor and Chair, CPAP
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William Murray, Adjunct Professor
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Patrick Roberts, Assistant Professor
John Rohr, Professor
Gary Walmsley, Professor Emeritus
Orion White, Professor Emeritus
James Wolf, Professor
Colleen Woodard, Visiting Assistant Professor and Roundtable Co-Chair

CPAP-Alexandria Staff

Irene Jung, Office Administrator
Beth Offenbacher, Graduate Assistant
Alejandra Palma, Graduate Assistant
Tara Bryan, Graduate Assistant
Anusha Seneviratne, Graduate Assistant

Graphic Design of Report Cover and Poster by Alejandria Palma

Report Layout by Beth Offenbacher

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Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Center for Public Administration and Policy - Alexandria
1021 Prince Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
703.706.8123
cpapnov@vt.edu
www.cpap.vt.edu
www.roundtable.cpap.vt.edu

Roundtable on Leadership & Administration

Leadership in the Information Age

*A Conversation with
Walter F. Ulmer, Jr.*

*Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Retired
Former President and CEO,
Center for Creative Leadership
and*

Dr. T. Owen Jacobs

*Co-founder and Partner, Executive Development
Associates, LLC*

*Formerly the Leo Cherne Distinguished Visiting
Professor of Behavioral Science Chair, Industrial College
of the Armed Forces, National Defense University*

Center for Public Administration & Policy

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

SUMMARY REPORT

October 2006

Purpose of the Roundtable Series

The Virginia Tech Center for Public Administration and Policy Roundtable Series on Leadership and Administration brings leading scholars and practitioners to the table for insightful and thoughtful conversation with students, members of academia, public managers, and participants from the nonprofit and private sector to exchange ideas, share research and experience, and advance our knowledge and understanding of leadership in public administration. Participants have the opportunity to explore the links between theory and practice in an intimate setting of conversation.

Leadership in the Information Age

The challenges of leading in the information age suggest a new paradigm for leadership theory and practice. We live and work in a fascinating era. Change is increasing exponentially while many of our management and leadership structures and skills are out of step with the pressures and needs of today's work environment. The mix of generations in today's workplace, coupled with advancements in technology and information systems, further complicate how we lead and manage today.

There are new expectations surrounding work habits and how the flow of information is managed, and how we communicate with and relate to the people with whom we work. Most notably, what we expect of our leaders and how we respond to leadership has changed. We need a new conversation about how to lead and manage in an information age—from both scholarly and a practitioner point of view.

Round Table guests Lieutenant General Walter Ulmer (Retired, US Army), Dr. Owen Jacobs, and moderator Dr. Colleen Woodard explore these challenges in this Round Table conversation.



At the Table

***Walter F. Ulmer, Jr.
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Retired
Former President and CEO,
Center for Creative Leadership***

For the last several years Lieutenant General Walter Ulmer has been an independent consultant, specializing in executive leadership and the management of complex organizations. After retiring from active duty from the U.S. Army, he served from July 1985 to October 1994 as President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina. In 2002, he was selected the first General of the Army Omar N. Bradley Chair of Strategic Leadership, hosted jointly by Dickinson College and the Army War College. Lieutenant General Ulmer is a 1952 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and holds a Masters degree from Penn State University, at which he was designated an Alumni Fellow in 1992.

***Dr. T. Owen Jacobs
Co-founder and Partner,
Executive Development Associates, LLC
Formerly the Leo Cherne Distinguished
Visiting Professor of Behavioral Science
Chair,
Industrial College of the Armed Forces,
National Defense University***

Dr. Jacobs is presently co-founder and a partner at Executive Development Associates, LLC. From 1995 to 2005, he held the Leo Cherne Distinguished Visiting Professor of Behavioral Science Chair at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University. From 1974 to 2005, Dr. Jacobs served in a series of assignments with the U. S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, where he completed landmark research on strategic performance requirements and the developmental processes required to produce strategic leadership skills. Dr. Jacobs received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from Vanderbilt University, and his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of Leadership and Exchange in Formal Organizations, and Strategic Leadership: The Competitive Edge as well as eleven book chapters, 28 reports, and numerous other articles.

Dr. Colleen Woodard
Roundtable Moderator
CPAP Visiting Professor

As a visiting professor with the Center for Public Administration and Policy, Dr. Woodard teaches personnel and budgeting courses. After a distinguished career as a Human Resources Director for the Federal Government, she became CEO and Consulting Director of Federal Technology Services, Inc. Fed-Tech provides independent consultation in Human Resources Management (HRM) and Training. Dr. Woodard earned her BA in history from Alvernia College in Reading, Pennsylvania, a masters in Adult Education from Virginia Tech and her Ph.D. from Virginia Tech's CPAP.

Three Dimensions of Leadership

Three dimensions of leadership characterize leadership in the information age, according to Dr. Jacobs:

- 1) The scope and scale of organizational and environmental complexity;
- 2) The nature of leadership and how it differs depending on the position you hold in an organization; and
- 3) How an individual's leadership abilities and their understanding of leadership both mature over time and develop into leadership capacity.

Complexity

"In terms of complexity, the world we know now is a very young world" from an organizational perspective, said Dr. Jacobs. He notes how most organizations today have been around for less than a century. "In the mid-19th century, there were no huge organizations. There was no stock market, there were no global flows of money," he said. In fact, large organizations were largely nonexistent until about 1910, when Ford Motor Company began the movement toward vertically integrated industry, as we know it now.

By contrast, today we live in a world of "huge, massive institutions with massive impacts," said Dr. Jacobs. The result has been a "nearly exponential change in information technology." Moreover, globalization has led to increased organizational complexity. Today's organizational leaders must also maintain a competitive advantage in such an environment.

Leadership Levels

As a result of these often-competing pressures, 21st century organizations are faced with a need to understand how to

both develop and cultivate leadership at all levels of the organization—what Dr. Jacobs termed "leadership at the bottom, leadership at the middle and systems leadership." Each level suggests a different leadership skill, from interpersonal skills, to the ability to structure policy and procedures as context for action, to an ability to think strategically about the organization and its environment in its entirety.

Leadership at the bottom is sometimes regarded as largely personal, where a leader influences someone to take action, said Dr. Jacobs. This aspect of leadership envelops all three levels of leadership. Based on much of psychological theory in the 1950s and 1960s, this conception of leadership "reflects a range of interpersonal skills that the leader must exhibit to be successful. Theories from this era also characterized leaders as individuals who are "adding value to your group" by virtue of unique personal contributions.

By comparison, leadership at the *middle level* of the organization is different. The leader does not "influence what happens on the factory floor by their personal presence," said Dr. Jacobs. Rather, "they influence what happens on the factory floor by the policies and procedures they set up."

Further, if leaders don't understand their organization as a system, "then they can't set those conditions in such a way that the individuals at the bottom are productive." Most importantly, he noted, "it's essential that those people at the bottom have a sense of the worth of the work that they do. If you don't have a sense of worth about the work that you're doing, you can't become personally invested in doing it." He notes that it's particularly important to structure the organization at the bottom so that

individuals feel a sense of contribution and personal worth in their ongoing activities.

At the *systems level*, strategic leadership is critical. The leader must understand “the whole environment in which their organizations are competing with other organizations,” said Dr. Jacobs. As we globalize and as we must be competitive with other industries in other nations and with other nations, over which we have no legislative control, “the complexity is greater still.”

Leadership Capacity

These concepts all contribute to what Dr. Jacobs terms *leadership capacity*. One important aspect of leadership is being able to understand conceptual complexity. “How much do I know about this environment in which we are operating, and about the cause/effect relationship,” said Dr. Jacobs. “To what extent am I able to understand the complexity of what I see?”

“If we grow in complexity of understanding over time, then we grow in our capacity to understand these more complex levels that we must operate in eventually – if we are to be meaningful leaders.” In this vein, “you hear a lot about connecting the dots. To a large extent it’s about connecting the dots at a strategic level,” said Dr. Jacobs.

Capacities to Lead: Stage Theory

Developing the capacity to lead, Dr. Jacobs noted, rests in part with “maturing as a person in relation to others and in relation to society.” He referred to Kegan’s (1982) work on the stages of leadership as a means to illustrate what he has referred to elsewhere as an individual becoming “successively more objective about how to assess himself/herself in relation to the assessments of others, and how to reach

sound decisions in the face of conflicting pressures (Jacobs, undated).

Kegan’s first stage is narcissism; the second is materialistic self-centeredness that’s focused on power and accomplishing one’s own goals and agendas. The third stage is relational, where other people become equally as or perhaps more important than the individual leader; and stage four is independent self-assessment and self-awareness, where the leader understands her or himself in context with others and “how I thus ought to operate.”

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The leader at the fourth stage has thought through his or her own values, beliefs and societal goals, said Dr. Jacobs. The leader also is able to integrate each of these elements in determining “how to act appropriately in context.”

“Every great leader has an abiding interest in the well-being of others and some degree of commitment to go out of their way to improve the well-being of others.” If you find someone who has that, that person has great potential, he added. “If you find someone who has everything else but lacks

that, be suspicious. That person may not be truly great.”

Perhaps most notably, that person may not be who you truly want to be making crucial decisions. Most people conceptualize leadership based on an individual’s personal attributes, he said. They ask whether a person exhibits certain traits that they associate with leadership. Instead, the real test should be, in a given situation, did the actions of the leader make the situation at hand better for all concerned?

Developing the Capacities to Lead

How does a leader learn to operate in a way that makes any given situation better for all

“So the question is, are you and I going to be smart enough in that particular situation to take our time and listen to the experts and listen to the discussion... and then say, what do you think about B or should we modify that a little bit?”

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those concerned? How do you, in short, develop strategic leadership? General Ulmer focused on the work of the Center for Creative Leadership, which has consistently emphasized the importance of feedback for leadership development over many years. The use of feedback, he said “is the main linchpin between theory and practice as a leader that has been predominantly missing

from many of our models and our studies over the years.”

General Ulmer believes that training and education is more important today than ever in leader development because of the increasing complexity of the world around us. He related a story about a talk he gave at a leadership conference held at the U.S. Navy Academy in Annapolis many years ago while he was an Army brigadier general. In his presentation, he spoke about the use of 360° feedback as a tool for leadership feedback. The plebes were reluctant to believe that a senior officer would accept such feedback about his or her behavior from below.

“We’ve come a long way in 20 years,” said General Ulmer. “Many of the services—and the Army in particular—now have devised systems of 360° feedback. You can go to on the computer and can get some random subordinates and peers and your bosses and anonymously figure out what they think of your behavior in certain categories.”

While subordinates may not be ideal for feedback on every aspect of strategic leadership behavior, he said subordinates do serve as the best judges of whether the leader as a person of integrity and if he or she exhibits basically the right intent. Such feedback is also vital for determining how the leader can best relate to others and move people toward a particular goal in an operation. “If you were to ask the question between the boss, the peer and the subordinate, ‘who knows me,’” said General Ulmer, “that’s a no-brainer.”

This reliance upon how others perceive leadership actions, General Ulmer noted, reflects a movement in leadership studies away from the traits of a leader, toward the behaviors of leaders. Goleman’s emotional

intelligence of leaders is part of this movement, where leaders consider how others perceive their actions. Dr. Jacobs reinforced the importance of this concept that highlights the concept of self-awareness, awareness of others and an awareness of a leader's interactions with others. According to Dr. Jacobs, such an approach allows leaders to adapt their style to the individual needs with whom they are interacting.

While leaders can learn to be self-aware and emotionally intelligent, General Ulmer noted how important an individual's early childhood is to leadership development. "You and I are limited to some extent by some fundamental neuroses...Genetics and the first eight years of our lives, whether we like it or not, have enduring impact on our capacity to move past beyond certain areas," he said. "I'm not saying we're a prisoner to them, but we have some compelling comfort zones deriving from genetics and early childhood that we really need to be aware of so that we can take advantage of them or modify them to some extent."

Within these comfort zones, however, leaders must work to develop competencies for both leading and managing, and maintaining both is challenging. General Ulmer discussed the intertwined natures of leadership and management, making them difficult to separate in organizational practice. He defines leadership as "articulating a vision and an end result and motivating people and developing trust," and management as "allocating resources and describing the work to be done and designing and implementing organizational systems."

Organizational leaders regularly confront both management and leadership challenges, said General Ulmer. "In

practice, it seems still difficult to grow strategic-level leaders who routinely retain managerial competence on one hand, and who remember that the human element is really what makes an organization work."

Dr. Jacobs asked, "What behaviors do people expect from leaders? It's different for each individual, because they have different needs." However, General Ulmer regards a demonstration of trust as the most important among all leadership and managerial competencies. "Trust is ultimately the glue that holds the organization together as an entity," he said. "It's also the lubricant that handles organizational friction. Among all other things, it's the most important of the leader's capabilities."

Leadership Capacities in Action: Style and Situation

General Ulmer emphasized how different situations require different types of leadership, which in turn reveal different leadership capacities. He recalled the time he was a corps commander at Fort Hood, Texas. "There was a very large meeting to discuss the redesign of the corps architecture for communications and data processing."

"There were captains and GS-8s in that meeting who had forgotten more about electronic architecture than I will ever know," he said, "but I'm still the boss and I'm ultimately going to be the one to make the decision."

"We had four options and I could have very easily said let's do 'A'," General Ulmer said. "So the question is, are you and I going to be smart enough in that particular situation to take our time and listen to the experts and listen to the discussion...and then say,

what do you think about B or should we modify that a little bit?"

"Sometimes I was smart enough to act in that mode and probably sometimes I wasn't," he said. "But the question is not maybe draconian or centralized decision making versus getting to know and love people and having them know and love you. It's more adapting the particular design to the situation with a couple of caveats."

"The first is, regardless of the situation, if you are routinely arrogant and inappropriately demanding and careless and callous about your relationship with people, I don't care whether it's IBM, the Pontiac Division or the U.S. Army, you aren't going to be as good as you could be because you aren't going to get the people to help you when you need it," said General Ulmer. Leadership experience also doesn't matter in this vein; "the more complex the organization, the more help that you need with running it."

He said it's also essential to understand "how to build and select leaders who have the capacity to move and change and grow." In particular, "we need to look

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carefully at the methods we use for selecting people for promotion" as well as how leaders are developed, said General Ulmer, as both are essential.

Dr. Jacobs commented that key to developing leadership capacity is to understand the importance of relationships, particularly to young leaders. Relationships are important to them because "they have come up through peer leadership relationships as adolescents and as very young adults, and so now there's the question, how should I act in this boss relationship in a formal organization?"

Dr. Jacobs counsels young leaders to consider their own personal needs. "If you have a great need for others to like you, then you are vulnerable to manipulation by others who will withhold their 'affection' as a lever for getting you to do what they want you to do, and that's not leadership." General Ulmer agreed with this point.

However, Dr. Jacobs said, personal needs have to be placed in perspective. "That's what [Kegan's] stage theory is all about," he explained. "If I'm captured in Stage 3, where somebody else's opinion of me or affection for me now governs me, if that gives them a lever over my judgment or my decisions, I can't make decisions that are not loaded with self-interest.

"I must be able to make decisions, or taking actions in a leadership role I must be able to stand back from that need of my own, and place the need of the situation ahead of my own needs. That's really the essence of selfless service, which is an essential in the military."

In this light, Dr. Jacobs noted the importance of maturity in personnel selection for accomplishing the

organization's mission, particularly a dedication to personal performance.

"If you have subordinates who are as fully capable and as fully committed as you are to getting done what needs to be done," the emphasis in the organization then shifts to the person's relationship to their respective role, according to Dr. Jacobs. The mature individual focuses on "What's my job?" and "What do I do to facilitate getting it done?" rather than worrying about issues related to formality or informality.

This dynamic applies in the military and in other contexts as well, said Dr. Jacobs. He cited an example from an Australian mining company where its executive leaders met around a round table in order to minimize the appearance of rank distinction and to facilitate better communication. One way to be uninvited to future meetings was to not share information that was relevant to a decision; however, "if you disagreed on good grounds, it would get you in to the group," said Dr. Jacobs.

"You've got to be approachable. You've got to be a listener, you've got to care [about] what you hear," Dr. Jacobs emphasized. "Once those things are mastered within the culture, I don't think you need to worry about if you're friendly with someone. It's the business of letting the other person know that that person is a significant human being that you care about. But you're not into it for personal gain from that person."

This "doesn't mean that there can't be great affection and mutual respect," General Ulmer chimed in. "In good organizations with good leaders, you'll find an awful lot of that." He cited a study of four U.S. Army division commanders in Iraq a few years back to illustrate his point.

General Ulmer said three of the commanders were the leaders about which their subordinates said, "I would walk through hell with this guy, he is just a super human being. They didn't say he was perfect, just a super human being." Interestingly, he continued, the fourth was a commander his soldiers described as "great"—however, this description was followed by polite suggestions for improvement from the soldiers in the division.

"I would go back and sit down for two or three hours with the division commander after meeting with his people, and I'd say, you know, they know you're a guy with great integrity and courage and they respect that. But if you would, make sure you aren't playing favorites among your subordinates." Then the two men would discuss what might have caused the soldiers to perceive favoritism by the commander.

He continued: "The more you are highly regarded by the people who work around you, the more important it is for them not to perceive" that you play favorites. "No one wants to be among the second string."

He noted how this kind of behavior could emotionally affect adults as well as children. Both are "resilient and also fragile, in that they don't like to be neglected."

Leading and the Learning Environment

Dr. Jacobs discussed work by Womack at MIT about Toyota, which details how the auto manufacturer developed a factory culture in order to effectively compete against U.S. automakers. Dr. Jacobs noted that Womack's work is a good example of how today's information age requires that organizations be rapidly adaptive, agile and able to use their human resources in the most advantageous way possible.

Womack's book profiles the idea of a knowledge worker as it applies to Toyota manufacturing. "A knowledge worker is someone who has professional knowledge of some sort who is empowered by his or her organization in certain situations to exercise judgment, discretion," explained Dr. Jacobs.

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At Toyota, a new factory worker would not only be trained with the knowledge necessary for his or her own job, but also trained to perform two or three other jobs on that automotive manufacturing line, as contrasted with one person per job in the U.S. automotive industry today. Dr. Jacob's compared the bureaucratic U.S. system, where workers are perceived "as a replaceable part" in keeping with Henry Ford's original philosophy, with Toyota's orientation toward an information age, knowledge worker factory culture that is intended to enhance both factory quality and productivity. "The decision process has been moved down in the organization to the point closest to where policy and

information come together," said Dr. Jacobs. Decisions are pushed down as far as they can go in information age organizations.

General Ulmer described how some U.S. automotive plants now give the authority to line workers to stop the factory line when they spot serious problems. "Anyone on the line that wants to stop the line can reach up there and push that red button," he said. "Now, when you do that, it costs every hour hundreds of thousands of dollars of productivity...interestingly, [the button] is rarely pushed. It seems that when people know they have the authority to do that, they do things that prevent it from happening."

The knowledge worker culture means that leadership selection "is important, because you can't make a knowledge worker out of just anyone," said Dr. Jacobs. "The individual must have the capability for assuming the responsibility for making decisions based on really a higher order of information and knowledge than maybe otherwise would have been required. So the person has to be able to shoulder that responsibility. But the leadership has to be able to allow that capability to bloom."

"What you have to have is a learning environment in the organization such that mistakes don't happen very much," he continued. "You can't afford mistakes, so you have to have a leadership policy that allows something to work to prevent mistakes that doesn't at the same time threaten the individuals who are workers."

How does this work? "Suppose you're my boss and I've got this bright idea. I don't exercise unilateral decision making, so I come and talk it through with you," said Dr. Jacobs. The boss helps the worker "think through whether this is likely to work or not." He asks "how can we do this

in a way that minimizes the risk to the organization?"

Perhaps most importantly, throughout the discussion the boss "is mentoring me, he's growing me, he's expanding my mind, teaching me how to think, and he's teaching me how to apply the information I may have gained someplace else. That's the information age organization."

General Ulmer described his work studying the role of information in systems that fail or succeed. The design of the technical system is rarely a criterion. At the senior level, it is rare that a person fails because of lack of technical competence.

Rather, leaders "fail in an information age organization because they somehow stop the flow of critical information," said General Ulmer. "They stop the flow of critical information, more often than not, by a personality that will not stay still for new ideas or anything that approaches it." For this reason, he believes that the approachability of a leader or willingness to listen "is more and more important the more sophisticated the organization."

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More About Our Round Table Guests

Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer, Jr. (U.S. Army, Retired)

General Ulmer is the author of multiple articles and books on management and leadership, and he is a frequent lecturer on the roles and development of senior leaders. His audiences have included academic, business, and public sector groups in Europe, Australia, Japan, and the former Soviet Union in addition to those in Mexico, Canada, and the United States.

General Ulmer was co-author of a 2002 report on American military culture published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and of a 2004 Army War College study of leadership at division command level in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

His military career included command of the 3d Armored Division in West Germany, and III Corps at Fort Hood, Texas. He was in Korea at the end of the Korean War, and completed two tours of duty in Vietnam. He has been a faculty member and later was Commandant of Cadets at West Point and was director of Student Research at the Army War College in the early 1970's.

His military decorations include two awards of the Silver Star, the Air Medal with "V" device, three awards of the Legion of Merit, and the Distinguished Service

Medal. His advisory team was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for its actions at An Loc during the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive in 1972. He held the Combat Infantryman and Master Parachutist badges, and decorations also from by the Republics of Korea and Vietnam, and the Federal Republic of Germany.

He has served as a member of the Board of Visitors of the Babcock Graduate School of Management of Wake Forest University, has been a member of the National Leadership Development Group of the American Council on Education, a member of the Conference Board, and served on the Executive Education Advisory Council of the General Electric Company.

General Ulmer has been consultant to agencies of the Department of Defense, the Army Science Board, and the Center for Strategic & International Studies, as well as to business organizations. In 1996 he was named a Distinguished Fellow of the U.S. Army War College, and in 2002 a Distinguished Graduate of the United States Military Academy.

Dr. T. Owen Jacobs

Dr. Jacobs is a noted scholar and author in the field of leadership and management.

He began research on leadership in 1957 with Carl Lange, developing a social learning theory-based concept of the functional roles of leaders in groups. This was among the first formulations of leadership incorporating the concept of "value added" (exchange theory), which provides a broad conceptual framework within which to view leader functional roles, leader "value added," organizational power dynamics, and organizational pathology stemming from inappropriate leadership and management controls.

With Elliott Jaques, Dr. Jacobs developed an adaptation of Jaques' requisite organization structure that specifies (a) critical performance requirements at the various levels of a requisitely structured organization, and (b) the critical cognitive skills which must develop over time to enable successful performance.

The structure identifies developmental targets over time and constitutes a theory-based template for development of leadership within large-scale organizations. The conceptual base for this structure has been widely adopted by the military senior service colleges.

Dr. Jacobs' most significant recent publication was as leadership section editor and chapter contributor (with Jaques) in Handbook of Military Psychology.

He was the year 2000 recipient of the John C. Flanagan Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Psychological Association Division of Military Psychology, and he is a Fellow of both the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Society.

"Trust is ultimately the glue that holds the organization together as an entity," he said. "It's also the lubricant that handles organizational friction. Among all other things, it's the most important of the leader's capabilities."

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