

Storytelling: My Personal Leadership Journey

Jolene Crowder, President, Blue Ridge University

Story Summary. Blue Ridge University is a hypothetical public, regional comprehensive university that we use at key points in the book to illustrate one institution's transformational journey from 2020 to 2030. It is in imaginary Carsonville, North Carolina in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In 2020, Blue Ridge had 6000 students on campus and 3000 off, served either through online courses or at a branch campus in Charlotte, North Carolina.

In this part of the story, President Jolene Crowder looks backward from 2030 to describe her personal quest to develop the ***Transformative Leadership Capacity*** necessary to meet the challenges of COVID and the Accelerations, Disruptions, and Transformations that she and her University experienced between 2020 and 2030. Her efforts also involved building the leadership capacity of a wide range of campus leaders, who worked with her to help Blue Ridge thrive.

We use four other storytelling episodes to describe Blue Ridge University's progress from different perspectives. In Chapter III, President Crowder describes how she and the Guiding Coalition selected and deployed a ***Model for Leading and Navigating Transformation***. In Chapter IV, she recounts how she used a continuously updated ***Engagement Action Plan*** to engage and energize the university community. In Chapter VI, President Crowder chronicles Blue Ridge's journey from 2020 through 2030, identifying ***Expeditionary Strategies, Adjustments and Major Pivots, Instructive Failures, Accomplishments and Outcomes, and Lessons Learned*** along the way. Finally, in Chapter VII she reports on Blue Ridge University's emergence as a key player in the successful economic development of its service region.

This storytelling enables us to provide accessible narratives to help readers understand the concepts in this book and the transformations they will soon experience. Our stories are based on syntheses of the insights from our research and case studies about how actual innovative leaders have already transformed elements of their institutions and have developed visions and plans to do much more over the next ten years – and beyond.

Why Read This? Illustrates the challenges of a president engaged in self-improvement during a crisis, finding and collaborating with peers and mentors, and successfully struggling to develop new transformative leadership skills.



The Story *Referenced in Chapter I*

It is 2030 and it is interesting to look back on the last decade here at Blue Ridge University. With this story, I want to communicate how it felt to be a leader in this historically challenging time. To say that when the COVID-19 Pandemic crashed on the scene in 2020 that I was unprepared to lead Blue Ridge University into the coming decade is an understatement.

My professional journey took the standard faculty and academic administration path to President. I was delighted to be named the President of Blue Ridge in 2016; the “leadership strategy” I had in my mind was to rock no boats, serve five to seven years, and then move on to another institution, preferably of higher prestige. Obviously, this “quiet” approach was untenable after COVID hit. The story I want to tell here is how, with the help of some key mentors, a marvelously understanding and supportive University community, and life-saving doses of humility and humor, I overcame this major deficit. My journey focused on three areas of action.

Figure 1 – Three Areas of Action



Sought Help from Mentors

It was my good fortune to find two people close by who had the knowledge and experience to guide and support my crash course in transformational leadership. They were the recently appointed Chair of the Blue Ridge Board, Charles Powell, a highly successful banker from Charlotte, North Carolina and James Jenks, our recently hired business school dean, whose expertise in transformational leadership was critical to my growth and ultimate capability. Although I know it would be difficult to replicate the depth of knowledge and wisdom Charles and Jim brought to our relationship, I do believe that most presidents can find a mentor on their board or from their local community to help them develop and hone their leadership skills.

Right after COVID crashed on the scene, I called Charles to ask him if I could brief him on the situation. We got together and I pulled no punches on the historic threat I thought COVID posed for Blue Ridge. Charles was encountering significant challenges with the bank he was leading, but also was clearly on his way to getting on top of them. He asked me if I would like to work with him on defining the scope of the problems the University faced, a short-term strategy for coping with COVID, and a long-term one to get Blue Ridge on track to transform

and thrive. He added that Jim Jenks had met with him on some issues at his bank and he believed that Jim could provide me with a lot of help on strategy development and execution. I accepted his offer of help immediately and as I was returning to campus, I called Jim to set up a meeting to see if he would be willing to help as well. He quickly said yes and came directly to the point: there is little or nothing that has prepared you to lead in circumstances like this.

He went on to say that I had many of the qualities that would make it worth his time to work with me. He said that I was ethical, appeared to have the potential to be courageous, and seemed to be a centered person who had not stopped growing personally and professionally. But on most of the key variables that make for a great leader, I was either a neophyte or—and this was where the real problems lay—I had learned a lot of bad habits that had to be unlearned. He proposed that Charles Powell and he serve as a mentoring team for me. Their one requirement would be that I take on this challenge seriously and work hard at changing. He would bring the theory and Charles would bring a wealth of real-world experience.

This duo served as my mentors and my rock for seven years until James left to become the Dean of the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Charles was named chief executive officer of one of the big five national banks. I miss them, but they have been replaced by a University community that is truly supportive and, at the same time, highly successful.

So where did Charles and Jim see my weaknesses? They thought, based on my performance at Blue Ridge, that I needed to work on organizational communication and inclusion of a much greater cross-section of the University community. In addition, I would have to take a crash course on leading, navigating, and orchestrating transformation, using a methodology they would share with me that involved significant empowerment of the University community, development of a compelling University vision addressed to the realities of the coming decade, and an orchestrated plan for execution that would be adjusted as University conditions changed.



Addressed First Things First

They also suggested that I create a large network of broadly representative coalitions to address the key challenges before the University. These coalitions would operate outside of the hierarchy and be empowered to move creatively and quickly in their work. It was these groups, overseen by a Guiding Coalition, that consistently and rapidly came up with creative solutions. They also drew in a large cross-section of leaders from the University community and greatly enhanced inclusion and communication across the campus.

Charles also suggested that I initiate as soon as possible a Board annual assessment that he had recently learned about and understood would provide me with constructive feedback on how I was doing in my role. Initially and periodically—although I later changed it to annually—I was to undergo a 360-degree evaluation. At first this scared me, but later it became a major source of information about how my leadership was working—or not. I came to hunger for this feedback.



I felt like I was drinking from a firehose. In one short week I learned that I had so much to learn and unlearn to be a transformative leader, but I also felt like I was finally getting the knowledge and tools I needed to do my job.

One thing I began at this point was to think about what type of leader I wanted to be; something I had never really considered. This endeavor had a huge payoff for me and was reassuring. If I had to summarize my conclusions from this study, it is that at their core the best leaders are humble and yet relentlessly focused on helping the entire the organization work together to be the best it can be. And, it probably goes without saying, that college presidencies in these times are incredibly difficult to do.

The phrase, “build the airplane while it is taking off,” took on a new relevance to me in the month after COVID hit. The University was severely wounded, and we needed to stop the bleeding. We put together *ad hoc* teams to address the key issues, and at Charles’ and Jim’s urging, I made it clear to the team chairs and the teams that I was delegating full authority to them to address their charges and would provide them with whatever support they needed.

At the same time—also at Charles’ and Jim’s urging—I formed a Guiding Coalition to begin working on a long-term transformation strategy for the University. Both Charles and Jim served as members and the other members were drawn from all levels and divisions of the University. They were handpicked leaders, who we believed would be supportive of transformation and could successfully help to bring it about. We were not talking about followers who always say yes; we were seeking people who would tell us the truth, but at the same time help lead the University into a transformed but more promising future.



The *ad hoc* teams moved effectively and with dispatch to stop the bleeding. A few needed support from consultants to get started and for help in collecting accurate financial and assessment data quickly. Taken together the team’s plans called for opening the campus safely and smartly in the fall 2020, immediately addressing budget reductions and revenue shortfalls, assessing and continuously improving distance learning and technology support, and resetting and transformation of our communications approach for the University community.

Concurrently, we launched a ten-year campaign to completely transform and regenerate the University. We realized that we did not have the luxury of focusing solely on the short-term even in the heat of the crisis and that the steps we took in 2020-21 had to be considered in light of how they would affect the University in the long term. To introduce this long-view, we established a small strategic thinking group with five our most future-oriented thinkers drawn from the faculty, staff, and the Board. This group pushed our planning horizon out 15 years to where higher education was going and caused us all to begin thinking outside of the box. The work of this group was widely shared across the institution and raised everyone’s awareness of the threats and opportunities facing the University in the long-term and of the need for transformation.

Followed a Long and Winding Road

The Blue Ridge ten-year campaign for transformation is documented in the story that appears in Chapter VII of this book. In those ten years, I went to school on leadership. Here is what I learned, sometimes the hard way.:

- **Importance of Vision.** An honest, hopeful, and compelling vision for the University's future that was widely and deeply communicated was essential. Every member of the University community needed to feel like they were part of a future they could believe in and support. I cannot overstate the importance of communication from the top that is delivered through channels that members of the community actually use. Broadcast memos and static strategic plans don't work. The communication process we used was a demanding, often one-on-one process, requiring huge amounts of emotional and physical energy and a lot of courage. Bad news is not easy to deliver. Over time, using this approach, as measured by employee surveys, Blue Ridge University went from a fearful, disaffected community to one that thought the vision was on the right track and that they had an important role in achieving it.



- **Many Twists and Turns Along the Way.** Our expedition over the ten-year campaign had many twists and turns. We put money on initiatives that sometimes didn't pan out. The key, I found, was to see the Campaign as a series of initiatives that were successive approximations in the definition of a course to achieve our vision for the University. Along the way, there was a need for adjustments. Everyone had to be honest about how things were going and, when failure was clear, to have no compunction about pulling the plug. Our mantra was that the only failure was a failure that we kept making. Our people began to see that they could fail and still be a part of the game.
- **Well Publicized Early Wins Are Essential.** It was very important to have early wins for the University strategy, well communicated to the community. One of our early wins was a partnership with an education provider of a master's degree in instructional technology for K-12 faculty interested in becoming IT mentors for their colleagues. This program produced \$1.2 million in net new revenue in FY2020, providing a much-needed boost to the top line of the budget. I cannot overemphasize how important this "win" was to the morale of the University community in an hour of need. In my conversations around campus, it

seemed to me that there was a collective sigh of relief when we announced the success of this program and the feeling that with this success, “We can do this.”

- **Inclusivity Unleashes Energy, Creativity and Validation.** The approach we used to lead, navigate and orchestrate the transformation of Blue Ridge involved the creation of a constellation coalitions that were assigned the work of creating and executing a strategy for their achievement. The membership of these coalitions was recruited from all parts and levels of the University. We provided these groups a clear charge and empowered them to define how to get it done. Because their membership was diverse, the groups came up with all manner of new and constructive approaches that were innovative and that worked well. It was as though this widespread sharing of responsibility and power tapped reservoirs of energy and creativity that we didn’t know existed.



At the end of the ten-year campaign, virtually every member of the University faculty and staff had been involved in the work of the coalitions and could, with their own eyes, see their importance and how they, as participants, had made a difference for the University. My feeling as President was one of exhilaration and deep gratitude. I could feel the community coming together and putting its collective shoulders to the wheel to realize the transformation of the University. The seeming contradiction of leadership sharing power broadly and receiving more in return became a reality for me in the latter part of the Transformation Campaign.

- **Orchestration of Execution the Often Forgotten Essential.** Developing visions and strategies for their achievement is the easy part of leadership. The tough and enervating part, I found, was orchestrating their execution fully and on time, particularly in the early stages of the campaign. The creation of the constellation of coalitions helped a lot with execution, because most of those who were tasked with implementation had been a part of the group that developed the approach. As important as their comprehension of the approach was in the implementation phase, their understanding of the reasons for undertaking the transformation were even more important. As a result, particularly as positive achievements mounted, resistance dissolved, and positive engagement grew. In addition, we targeted funds to support the costs of initiative implementation and for training participants needed to do the new functions required of them.

- **Seeing and Seizing Opportunities.** This capacity was one that neither the Blue Ridge community nor I had when we began the ten-year campaign. But as we began to transform, we developed greater confidence in our ability to uncover and pull new and big things off. All of us could connect what we knew about the future of learning and work with what we were currently doing and could more easily see a path from the present to the future. It was as though the scales had been pulled off our eyes and we could see opportunities we had never seen before. And because we had that clearer vision and greater self confidence in our ability to execute, we successfully pursued transformative initiatives that we would not have pursued before.
- **Leaders Must be Centered.** As exciting and energizing as my work as President of Blue Ridge has been, it has demanded ungodly amounts of energy and time. It has taken a toll on me and my family, even though we see our work at Blue Ridge as a calling. I could not have survived without the physical and emotional support of my family and close colleagues. Charles Powell and James Jenks showed me a path forward and, particularly in the early phases, picked me up, screwed my head back on, and set me on my way with renewed confidence. I am not sure if it is true of everyone, but I believe most presidents would be well advised to understand that they need the support of others to succeed.
- **Achieving a Balanced Life.** They also need to have a life beyond the institution in which there is diversion, fun, and play. Finally, Charles and James put me on a regimen of continuous learning and retooling. Eventually I got the feeling that I was not only up to date in my approach to the role, but that I was a leader. That feeling only fueled my desire to keep learning and developing as a leader and as a person. The great thing about all of this is that I believe Blue Ridge is working that way too.

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