UM President Royce Engstrom on Leadership

In this episode, Dr. Abraham Kim and Allen Sangster sit down with University of Montana President Royce Engstrom to chat about the process of becoming a leader, the Global Leadership Initiative, and examples of leadership from President Engstrom’s life.

Allen: Welcome everyone to the Mansfield Global Leadership Podcast hosted at the Mansfield Center on the beautiful University of Montana campus. I’m Allen Sangster in the studio with Abe Kim, the Director of the Mansfield Center. Hi Abe.

Abe: Hi Allen.

Allen: Thank you everyone for your support and for listening. As this is a work in progress we’d love to get your feedback. You can leave us a comment in iTunes or email us directly. We’ll put our contact information in the notes of this episode.

Abe: As you know, last week’s episode touched on the life and legacy of Senator Mike Mansfield. Today we want to focus on present leaders. What better way to do that than by engaging an expert leader in our state, the President of the University of Montana, Dr. Royce Engstrom.

Allen: In 2007, Dr. Engstrom came to us from the University of South Dakota where he served as Vice President of Research, Dean of the Graduate School, and Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. We sat down with Dr. Engstrom a short time ago to ask him to outline the traits of a great leader.

Royce: You know I think of the job of leadership in several parts, particularly my job as President of the University. I kind of think of it as four areas. One is the area of really, vision and agenda setting if you will. Where is this organization going? Whether you’re talking about the United States of America, a university, or any other organization, how do you set an ambitious agenda, an ambitious vision for the organization that people will be excited about? And that people will want to work hard, work long hours, and be creative about? So setting that vision, setting that agenda is one of the key aspects of being a leader.

A second key aspect is really sort of running the organization. The management side of the organization. The day to day decision making that any leader is involved in on any given day. In my job, the range of topics that I am involved in in conversation is immense. It might range from a multimillion dollar deal we’re working on in some instances to literally the color of paint on the wall of some office that’s being constructed. So getting involved in all of those management decisions and being excited about all of them is a critical part of being a leader. You are in the decision making seat all the time and you have to have a passion; you have to be energized by the opportunity to make decisions.

A third aspect of being a leader, and one that is extremely challenging, is the area of communication. Communication with the various constituencies, whether in my case that’s perspective students, a forum that I just came from, the faculty, or external constituents, building
those relationships with people who in some way are going to help the university move forward with its agenda. Policy makers, donors, you are constantly communicating. I probably stand up in front of a dozen different groups at least every week in one form or another. Sometimes those are very impromptu, casual conversations, other times they are very well orchestrated events and so on.

And then finally, the last characteristic that is so important to me is the characteristic of learning. A leader needs to be constantly learning, whether that is learning about your organization—trying to understand more of what the Mansfield Center does, or the Department of Economics does on a daily basis—or your own personal learning. So I spend a fair amount of time reading about higher education policy, but I also love learning on a very personal level. For example I am trying to learn how to play the piano now, something that I have wanted to do for a long time. In the business that we are in, education, learning is an essential component. Again, like all of the other characteristics, you have to have sort of an abiding love for these to do them well and to be energized by them. These are difficult jobs, any leadership position is difficult, and if you don’t fundamentally love what you’re doing there, you will not enjoy the job. It’s a multifaceted job and one that comes with new adventures every single day.

Abe: What important suggestions would you give to young people who are aspiring to become leaders? What do you think they should start doing now as people who want to be a leader later in life?

Royce: Well you know part of that conversation or part of that is just deciding that you are a leader or you are a potential leader. When I was young I didn’t really see myself as a leader, and I certainly didn’t see myself as a University President until well along in my career. But there came a time fairly early on, probably in my undergraduate years, when I started to see in myself glimpses of leadership. I found myself the person who would sit in the front of the class and ask questions and take on those extra jobs when they became available. After a while I started to see there was a pattern here, and throughout my career that has been a little bit of the way that I have identified leadership potential in myself is that I look at what someone else is doing and I think, okay how would I handle that situation or how could I do that job differently or better in my own mind? But at some point I think you need to identify that there is a leader inside of you. That’s something you want to nurture and you want to grow and develop. Once you do that, then I think the real key is to put yourself in leadership positions, decision making positions. Kind of immerse yourself in opportunities to interact with other people and to help guide those people, that group of people to a productive outcome. So maybe you become the president of the speech and debate club or something like that. Or you take on a leadership role in student government. I think the most important thing is to immerse yourself in leadership opportunities. In situations where you do have to make decisions, you do have to help people coalesce around an idea. Bringing people together in some common direction is a real talent and it’s something that leaders do day in and day out. You have so many different voices in a university setting or in probably any other organization too, special interests and great thoughts on where we should be going. A leader has to be able to coalesce that energy around a common goal, around a common theme and then move it forward.

The other part, and I’ll speak particularly from a higher education point of view now, is to prepare yourself by taking the most challenging subjects that you can handle as a student, as a young person. Take the courses that you maybe think, “I don’t know anything about that, how am I going to succeed there?” Well that’s exactly the situation that you should put yourself in. Challenge
yourself with ideas that you maybe haven’t been exposed to before, people that you haven’t been exposed to before, and pursue a rigorous and challenging educational program.

**Abe**: You made reference to some important influences in your life. Could you tell us a little about what were some of the biggest influences in your life as a young person, through your education, and perhaps even in your family life, could you share some of those thoughts with us?

**Royce**: One of the traits of which I am most proud is my ability and interest in hard work. I get that from my father, there’s no question about it. He was a self-made business man. Came out of WWII as a mechanic, eventually owned his own business and did very well. I watched him work hard all of those years. At the time I probably didn’t realize what I was seeing, but looking back on it I clearly see that that’s where my work ethic came from was my father. Another important influence in my life was a man named John Jensen who ran a family ranch in the sand hills of Nebraska. In my high school years I worked on that ranch as a kid, you know just a ranch hand, and he taught me the importance of adapting to new situations and improvising. We were out there a long way from any town, so when a machine would break or an animal would get hurt you had to handle the situation really on your own. That experience taught me a lot about problem solving and just improvising to get something done. I’m fortunate to have had many great teachers over the years. I credit my sixth grade teacher with really inspiring in me a desire to learn about science. At the time there was a group of us kids who went to her and said we wanted to start a rocket club. She didn’t know anything about rockets but boy she went out of her way to get us materials and get us access to people who knew something about rockets. I don’t think we ever got a rocket off the ground, but we had great fun and it started a life of interest in the sciences. Certainly at the undergraduate level I had some professors who engaged me in undergraduate research at an early age and that was very influential it turns out in the direction I took with my career.

**Abe**: I assume a lot of those professors were Chemistry professors, which you eventually got your PhD in.

**Royce**: They were.

**Abe**: As you were furthering your career in the sciences, you mentioned that you took on greater leadership positions and finally it took you to a place where you thought about becoming a president of a university. What was that moment like? Was it a gradual experience, or did you always dream about someday I’m going to be a university president, or is it something that a certain point in your life where you realized this was a good possibility?

**Royce**: There was a point in my life where I realized that I needed to make a choice. So I was fortunate in having a successful career as a chemistry professor. I loved teaching chemistry, I loved doing research in chemistry, and I did that for about twenty years. Toward the end of that time period I was also becoming involved in administration. I got into administration really through research; I started as a research administrator. For a few years I balanced both of those together, kept my chemistry life going if you will. But there was a day I remember walking across campus at my former institution where I said ok, I need to make a decision here. These are two very full time directions, and I’m not going to be able to successfully balance both of those. I wasn’t doing justice to my research students because I couldn’t be there enough for them. So I remember very clearly walking across campus from one office to another one day and saying okay you have to make a decision here. You’ve had a wonderful twenty year run as a chemistry professor and I loved that, but then I
decided I’m going to go into administration and try to have an impact on institutions at a broader level. So that got me into central administration. It was somewhere along the way that I came to the realization that to really change an institution, you need to be its president. So that became a goal of mine.

Abe: So you came to the University of Montana in 2007, and then in October 15th, 2010 you became the 17th president of the University of Montana. Tell us a little bit about some of the challenges and joys of your job as the University President here at the University of Montana.

Royce: Let me start with the joys because they truly do make it a rewarding experience, and I have to tell you probably the most moving moment of the year for me in the life of the university is when I am presiding over commencement in May and watching the students graduate, seeing their parents, friends, and families there with them. Everyone excited about the future, those students have doors open for them that some of them never realized even existed, and they have come to a point of tremendous accomplishment in their lives. Most of them are going off on some new adventure whether that is right here in their home town or somewhere around the world. It’s a very moving time for me, and I really enjoy presiding over commencement. I think all of the opportunities we have to celebrate student accomplishment are the highlights of my year. For example, this weekend we have the international festival coming up. To see our international students celebrate their own heritage and share that with other students, that’s a wonderful event as well. Every time we see a story or a news release on a student or a group of students who have done well, like the Ethics Team that just won the National Championship Competition in Ethics. Those are wonderful opportunities, or when a member of our faculty or staff gets recognized for their accomplishments, those are the most gratifying moments. It’s about the people that we have at the university and their accomplishments. Those are the real joys of the job.

Challenges of the job, they are plentiful that’s for sure. We are always working on financial issues, financial challenges, whether those are dealing with lean years, whether they’re dealing with prosperous years, there’s always hard decisions to make about resources in an institution. Personnel decisions are always very difficult. There you have to have this combination of objectivity, what’s best for the university, what’s best for the organization, but also an aspect of humanity. How can we make this personnel change and do right by those individuals.

Allen: I suppose we’d better explain the University of Montana’s Global Leadership Initiative, or GLI program. The GLI program is a 4 year program that combines a whole host of activities—classroom experiences, internships, special lectures by international leaders, interdisciplinary coursework, etc.—into targeted opportunities for students to develop skills necessary to compete on the global market. Okay back to President Engstrom.

Abe: One of the main initiatives that you introduced coming in as the new president back in 2010 was the Global Leadership Initiative. Could you tell us a little bit about your vision for the GLI program? How you conceived it, how it came into fruition, and what are some of your visions for this program?

Royce: The Global Leadership Initiative is something that I am so proud of. Proud of our faculty for designing this program the way that it has come to be. When I came here as Provost, I asked a group of faculty to begin a very serious discussion about what should education in today’s world really look like for our students? What kinds of things should we expose our students to that we maybe aren’t doing so well now, or in a traditional classroom setting we just can’t quite accomplish? Over a period
of a few years, in discussions with the faculty, we evolved into this program we now call the Global Leadership Initiative which we did launch in 2010. It’s an opportunity for students to do several things. One, to begin to see themselves as leaders, to have the opportunity to ask themselves, am I a leader and if so what do I need to do to prepare to be a leader? It’s an opportunity for students to get an education in the broad context of what’s going on in the world. Exceedingly important today for our students to see the connections between what goes on right here in Missoula, Montana and what’s going on around the world. I think the issues before us right now are big ones, and so it’s important for us to give our students that context. Finally it gives the students the opportunity to put their educations to work in a problem solving sense. It gets them around a table with other students with different backgrounds than their own. Define and focus on a problem of interest and then work to solve that problem. They graduate having had that interdisciplinary teamwork experience.

Abe: In terms of the GLI Program, what do you hope that this eventually becomes? Do you envision it as something that all students at the University of Montana will eventually become a part of or is it something that students choose into?

Royce: I think the concepts and the ideals behind the GLI are ones that all students need to be exposed to in today’s world. I think every student who graduates from the University of Montana has to have some element of that global context, some element of that problem solving leadership aspect. That doesn’t necessarily mean that every student should formally enroll in the GLI. I can see students taking part in different levels of that but certainly I want the Global Leadership Initiative to be a hallmark of this institution. I want people to look to the University of Montana to say, if you want to be a leader, you should go to the University of Montana. If you want to be involved in the big questions before us as a society today, you go to the University of Montana to do that.

Abe: My final question is what do you hope your legacy to be as the 17th President of the University of Montana?

Royce: Well that’s a great question. I think after I’m done, I would like people to look back at my time here as one of academic innovation and the firm establishment of the University of Montana as an absolute leading institution when it comes to challenging, stimulating academics that prepare students to be leaders. I hope people would look back and say ok, the University of Montana is a leadership institution; it’s where you go to get the most challenging education available in public higher education. It’s a place where you go to really see the connections between what goes on here in our wonderful setting in the Northern Rockies and what goes on around the world. Leaving the institution in a state of high academic energy is I think the primary thing I would like to accomplish. There are a lot of other things along the way. It’s a great university when it comes to athletics and that helps us build so much rapport with our community. It’s a beautiful campus, obviously, so continuing to develop our facilities and physical infrastructure, that’s so important. All of those come together, though, to create one of the most vibrant learning centers in the United States.

Abe: President Engstrom, thank you very much for your time and thank you for opening up your life to us, we appreciate it very much.

Royce: Thank you Abe, it’s been fun.

Abe: Thank you.
Abe: This is a real fascinating interview about Dr. Engstrom's life, really highlights the importance of how people in his life really made a difference in terms of encouraging him to become a leader, starting with his father and teachers in the early parts of his career. And then for a leader, there is a decision point where one chooses to become a leader. I think that’s one of the important, interesting insights into this where for him, he had to make between becoming a researcher or an administrator. There was a specific point where he had to make that decision and once he chose to become a leader for a university, he started going down that path. Finally, I think, that leadership does require the development of skills. Beginning with people skills, listening skills, communication skills, the ability to persuade people, and so I think that’s an important take away for me at least as I listen to his comments in this interview. How about you Allen?

Allen: I agree, I think it’s important for students especially to sort of keep the future leadership opportunities that they might have in mind. As they go through their career to think about opportunities to develop the skills that Dr. Engstrom highlighted. Otherwise they’re not going to be able to develop in the way that they could and they won’t be able to step up and present themselves as a leader at a later date.

Abe: Well this wraps up our second podcast, and if you have any comments or suggestions please feel free to reach out to us. Thank you again Allen for this opportunity.

Allen: Thank you, Abe. For more information about this and other Mansfield Center programs please visit our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield. The Mansfield Center podcast is produced by myself and Abraham Kim with help from Mathew Olson. Our theme Music was composed by Ryan Dufresh. We’d love to know what you think, please rate us on iTunes and help others discover the show. I’m Allen Sangster. Thank you for listening.