

Success in Life and Career:
The Critical Element

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Convocation Remarks

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Graduates: I'd like to talk with you about the career success that awaits you. More importantly, I would like to talk to you about the success over a full life that is beckoning.

But what can I say?

You are here today because you are smart. You are here today because you work hard. You are here today because you are focused and motivated. And you are here today because you receive support and counsel from family, friends, and your professors.

What can I say?

I'd like to approach the challenge by asking you to think about some of the key items that have appeared in the newspapers and on television over the past year. You will recall a constant parade of stories describing violations of individual and institutional integrity. The violations are found in business organizations, not-for-profit organizations, philanthropic organizations, and churches. Examples are found among doctors, lawyers, politicians, business people, academicians, and priests. They include men, women – and even children – of all ages.

If you think back about the backgrounds of each of the individuals involved, you will recall that, virtually in every instance, each of the individuals was smart, talented, experienced, and often well-credentialed professionally. You will recall that each of the individuals worked tirelessly to achieve his or her level of leadership and influence. You will recall that, along the way, each individual had tremendous support from family, friends, and supporting organizations.

Yet, when these individuals came to their ethical “fork in the road”, they took the wrong branch. I am sure there are many more individuals who took the proper branch – unfortunately, we do not hear very much about these individuals. The individuals who took the wrong branch are newsworthy and this is what the media tend to highlight. The damage that these individuals inflict upon the organizations they represent, and upon the many individuals who are constituents of the organization, is enormous.

You probably already have come to this fork in the road. You probably have come to it several times. I assume – I certainly hope – that you have always taken the proper branch. During the course of your lives and careers, you will come to this fork in the road numerous times. I believe that most of you will take the proper branch each time. If you hesitate for a moment somewhere along the road, please consider the fact that people before you who were just as smart, hardworking, and supported are now suffering embarrassment, loss of job and status, fines, and even imprisonment.

I want you to avoid these consequences. Even more importantly, you will want to do the “right thing” because that is what good people – that is, ethical people with integrity – do. There are many more people who do good things than people who do bad things. But, again, the harm done by the few has significant impact on the many.

I know that you will be ethical over your lifetime. That is because I know that you are going forward as leaders in your career and lifelong activities. What are the attributes of leaders?

Successful leaders work hard – just like you. They are smart, talented, and knowledgeable – just like you. They know how to work in teams and groups – this means they are good followers as well as leaders – just like you. They possess strong and effective communication skills – I hope just like you. They are loyal to their institution’s mission and to their colleagues – just like you.

However, there is one other attribute that a successful leader must possess. It is the most important of all the attributes. It is ethical behavior.

What is ethical behavior? Most of you will say “that’s easy” – it means you speak with candor, that you are honest and fair in your actions. You do not lie, steal, or cheat.

You are correct. However, ethical behavior is much more. It also means you treat people the way you would like to be treated – with respect, civility, and compassion.

Ethical behavior requires that you learn how to listen – which is a form of respect. That you listen – so you can find workable compromises. That you listen – so you can gain knowledge.

Ethical behavior requires that you do not quickly rise to anger – which is a form of civility. That while you “mean what you say and say what you mean”, you are also sensitive to the beliefs and viewpoints of others. It means that you follow through on your commitments.

An ethical person’s reward in life is not primarily dollars, power, or public recognition. Rather, it is the satisfaction of knowing you helped others along the way.

While behaving in an ethical way may not always be easy, knowing what is ethical may even be harder. And you have to know before you can act.

For example, what are the ethics of stem cell research? Of abortion? Of the Freedom to Information Act? Of the Patriot Act? Of the war in Iraq? Of nuclear proliferation? Of utilization of the environment? Of children in poverty? Of capital punishment? Of gun control? Of discrimination and harassment? Of outsourcing? Of news media reporting? Of advertising aimed at children? And the list goes on endlessly.

Reasonable people can disagree on each of these issues. One person’s ethics may be in total opposition to another person’s ethics. Can they disagree and take different actions, and still – each of them – be ethical? This is a tough, philosophical as well as practical, question. I think the answer is “yes”, as long as they exhibit the attributes of ethical behavior I discussed earlier.

What does all this mean to you graduates on this special day? It means that the career and life that are in your future are challenging, complex, and exciting. It means you will come to many forks in the road ahead. These forks will present very difficult choices. The wise philosopher Yogi Berra said that “when you come to a fork in the road, take it.” If only it were so simple.

As difficult as these decisions will be for you, I have every confidence that you will take the correct branch, that is, the branch that coincides with your sense of ethics. Your family, RIT faculty and staff, and your own introspection have prepared you well for the bumpy and forked – but exciting and rewarding – road ahead.

Congratulations and good luck.