Norman R. Augustine: Doing the Right Thing

Most of what I learned about leadership came from team sports or the Boy Scouts,” stated Norman R. Augustine, whose career has included being Under Secretary of the Army, Chairman and CEO of Lockheed Martin Corp., Chairman of the American Red Cross, National President of the Boy Scouts of America, and Chairman of the National Academy of Engineering. Augustine has also led several major commissions, the most prominent resulting in 2007 in the monumental analysis of U.S. education and technological competitiveness Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future.

“I was not an extraordinary athlete but I loved sports and always had a ball in my hand,” Augustine explained. “In sports, you can learn key life lessons—about losing and recovering, about winning but not getting carried away, about the importance of teamwork, morale, and sportsmanship. And you can make mistakes in an environment where failure doesn’t have disastrous consequences. People don’t die, as they might from a decision you make in the army.”

Born in Denver in 1935, Augustine loved the mountains of Colorado. He started camping and hiking with the Boy Scouts at age nine and, by his teens, was working summers at a Boy Scout camp leading nature hikes. By age 16, he had performed all the work required to become an Eagle Scout—the highest rank, attained by fewer than one in 20 Scouts. “It’s amazing how many leaders in corporations, government, and nonprofits are also Eagle Scouts,” Augustine remarked.

An Accidental Leader

Augustine attended East High School in Denver, a very good, large public school with nearly 800 students in each grade. He did well in math, loved taking clocks apart, enjoyed woodworking and building things with his hands, and excelled at all academic subjects. One day when he was a junior, a teacher he did not know called him to his office. “Justin W. Brierly was a lifelong bachelor who got a kick out of seeing how many East High School students he could get admitted to Ivy League colleges,” Augustine recalled. Brierly handed him applications to Williams College and to Princeton University. When young Norm protested his family could not afford either, Brierly replied that if he got in, the college would...
pay his way. Someone asked his intended major. Because of his love for the outdoors, Augustine thought of becoming a forest ranger, but neither school offered forestry. “I asked: ‘What would be like forestry?’ The person suggested geological engineering. I had never even met an engineer, let alone a geological engineer, but that’s what I wrote on the application.”

Accepted by both institutions with full tuition paid, Augustine chose Princeton. A year later, when returning to Princeton on a midnight train from a date in New York City, an older classmate—also from East High—on the same train asserted that aeronautical engineering was the big up-and-coming field. “He was so compelling that on Monday I switched my major,” Augustine said, “although I was scared to death I was not up to it because it was considered by many to be the toughest course in Princeton.”

Despite his fears, he received his BSE magna cum laude in 1957, and his MSE from Princeton in 1959 and was elected to both Phi Beta Kappa and Tau Beta Pi.

Augustine said: “Princeton didn’t have a chapter of Tau Beta Pi when I graduated so it was several years after graduation that I officially became a member.”

Talk about lucky timing. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had been formed eight months earlier, a year after the USSR had launched Sputnik I. Engineers were in high demand. When Augustine applied to the aircraft division of Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica, he was assigned to work in research in the missiles and space division. “I loved research,” he recounted. “Everyone working in missiles and space technology was young. People would come to me with questions, and I would do my best to help. Soon I was put in charge of a design group. Before I knew it, I was made a section head, then program manager, then chief engineer, and so it went. Quite by accident, I found myself leading others.”

Indeed, looking back, Augustine reflected, “My life was one huge accident! I never realized until recently that I never had a grand plan. I simply had a lot of interests. I also focused on what I was doing, not on how to advance.” He is convinced that “the best way to get ahead in a career is NOT to try to get ahead. Instead, do what you are doing the best you know how, and opportunities will follow. You’ll be best at something you like, so choose something you love.”

**‘That’s How It’s Done Here’**

Once finding himself at the helm, however, and being an avid reader of biographies and history, Augustine began studying notable leaders to learn what made them great. He observed certain commonalities: “They were people of great character and high ethical standards. They worked hard. They were selfless—they did not think about themselves and their careers, but of the mission to be accomplished. They looked out for others, and treated everybody alike. Most importantly, as actions speak louder than words, they set a personal example.”

In Augustine’s view, establishing an organizational culture of character and integrity is paramount. After all, he asked, are employees “going to follow somebody they don’t trust? In a dictatorship, you can force people to do what you
want done, but that’s not leadership.” In his experience, a leader sets a tone from the top. “Smart people come into an organization, look around, see that those in authority don’t cut corners or behave unethically, and think ‘that’s how you do it around here.’”

As an example, he cited an economically difficult time around 1984, just after he was made President of Martin Marietta Denver Aerospace. It was imperative for the company to reduce expenses. Obvious savings could be realized if managers stopped flying first class and started taking coach. “But people were working long hours and company philosophy was we hire first class people and treat them first class, so I hated to lay this on them,” Augustine recounted. So without any fanfare or announcement, he personally began flying coach. Observing this, soon other managers followed suit. To everyone’s amazement, more than savings resulted from flying coach: “It put our com-

Augustine on Tau Beta Pi: “I have found that membership in Tau Beta Pi is sort of a ‘Good Housekeeping’ seal for engineers. When I run across a member I am pretty sure they are a good engineer. Over the years I have particularly enjoyed the publications and interactions made possible with other members. I am particularly proud that my son was also a member.”

Later, as CEO of Lockheed Martin, whenever he talked to a group of employees, he emphasized three points: Act ethically, take care of customers, treat everyone with respect. “I never mentioned profit—to the chagrin of our Wall Street bankers,” he remarked. “I believe if you get those three main things right, profit will take care of itself.”

The Power of Convincing
How different is leading corporations versus military organizations versus nonprofits? “The fundamentals of leadership across all three are surprisingly similar,” Augustine observed. The key difference is tactics. “In the uniformed military, people respect orders. In nonprofits, you can only lead by convincing. In a corporation, you do something in between.”

From his own experience, however, he feels that convincing is the most powerful. “In all three, you want to convince people why it’s important to reach a goal, and then let them figure out how to do it. You want to create an environment where everyone can excel and contribute. For one thing, everyone knows how to do their own job better than you know how to do their job. Plus, you want them to internalize your values, so they can persevere without you.”

As an example, he cited a time when Lockheed Martin was preparing a bid for a major fixed-price contract for manufacturing a tactical missile, in which competitors were to submit sealed bids to the Federal government; the low-
est bidder would win the job. Their cost estimate was just completed when an envelope arrived from an anonymous, presumably disgruntled employee at a competing company, disclosing the competitor’s bid. Lockheed Martin employees realized that if they shaved a little off, they could underbid the competitor and win the contract. But they didn’t. Lockheed Martin submitted its original bid to the Federal government.

And it lost the job. “But the employees did the legally and ethically right thing!” Augustine exclaimed. “More importantly, they did it without consulting me! That reveals the power of setting organizational culture. I hate losing. But I’d rather lose than cheat.”

**Engineering as Preparation**

Engineering is “the best undergraduate education you can take to prepare for virtually any career,” declared Augustine. “It is also an enormous help in any leadership position, because as a rule, engineers work hard, think analytically, are organized and disciplined, and don’t cut corners—after all, you can’t cheat Mother Nature!”

However, the biggest failing of many undergraduate programs in engineering, he feels, is their lack of liberal arts. “Engineers today need courses in economics and history nearly as much as they need thermodynamics. I was fortunate to study engineering in a liberal arts university, so I was required to take classes in literature, philosophy, and art—which lend different and valuable perspectives. There I also learned to write. Those things are essential to good leadership.”

Today, six years after the 2007 publication of the *Gathering Storm* report, Augustine is even more concerned about the quality of U.S. K-12 education. Worse, he sees an additional cloud darkening the horizon.

“Today our universities are greatly challenged,” he pointed out. “Throughout the 20th century, our universities were our competitive advantage. When writing our original report, it never occurred to us they could be endangered. But with the collapse of the economy in 2008, states have slashed their support to our great public universities, faculty salaries have declined, and faculty are being attracted abroad in a big international competition for talent. Our nation must reverse this if we are to continue to lead.”

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