Reflections on a Leader – the Legacy of Dr. Joseph J. Bulmer
by Dr. Lucille A. Marion

Dr. Joseph J. Bulmer served as the third president of Hudson Valley Community College for the 17-year period from 1979 until his retirement in 1996. Throughout its history, the college has been very fortunate to have always had the right man for the right job at the right time. Otto Guenther was the first president of Hudson Valley. His strong management style led the institution through its infancy and created the solid foundation upon which it has been built. Jim Fitzgibbons, who we lost only a few short months ago, led the institution through the turbulent ’60s and ’70s. His calm demeanor helped the college weather those most challenging times. When Jim retired, the Board of Trustees appointed Joe Bulmer, a nuclear engineer by training, and it is safe to say that with Doc’s arrival there was literally an explosion of energy that catapulted Hudson Valley Community College into the 21st century.

Doc was a scientist and an academician. He was naturally curious and exceptionally intelligent. He was interested and concerned with EVERYTHING. Everything was important – everything was relevant – everything mattered. And so he made it a point of knowing everything about the college – he knew what was going on in the classrooms, in the library, and on the playing fields. He knew the details of the budget, the curriculum, and what happened that day on the construction site. He took the time to learn everything and his interest was not just casual – it was genuine. Because everything was important – it all mattered.

He was most frustrated with us when we didn’t know what was going on and those of us who worked closely with him knew that when he asked us a question, he already knew the answer – he just wanted to see if we knew the answer too.

That was the business side of Doc, but there was another side of him as well.

Hanging in his office for all the years I worked with him was a plaque with the saying “Esere humano” It translates roughly into something like, “In all things there must be humanity.” Doc would often point to that plaque and remind us that we must never focus solely on the business at hand; we must also remember and focus on the human side of the enterprise as well. One of his strongest principles was that everyone deserved to be treated with dignity and respect. And so he practiced this concept of esere humano every day.

He did so by making it a point to know everyone. He knew the faculty, the staff and the students by name. But he also knew the names of the people in their lives – their spouses and parents, children and siblings. He knew who was graduating, who was sick, who had just taken a vacation. He knew that the heart and soul of the college was with the individuals who occupied its classrooms, offices and corridors. And so he walked those corridors and honored the people who traveled them by making them feel valued and important – by taking time to know them; by visiting them at home or in the hospital.
when they were ill; by attending their wakes and funerals and those of their loved ones. His genuine care and concern for people is what made him beloved by everyone he met.

Doc’s comprehensive attention to the business side of Hudson Valley is what gave the college muscle. His attention to the human side of the enterprise is what gave the college heart.

The other day I was asked what kind of boss Dr. Bulmer was. Was he the kind of boss who set the direction and let us move independently toward that objective, or was he a detailed kind of guy? My response was that he was both. He was a scientist by training and he relished the details of all things. But as a scientist he was also an inventor, an explorer – a visionary – a man who knew what was to come long before any of the rest of us had a clue.

Doc was an avid reader and he read everything – philosophy, history, management, technology, it didn’t matter what – it was all important – it all mattered. He used the world as his classroom and no matter where he went whether it was a local meeting or a national conference – a visit to a Fortune 500 company or a visit to a local diner – there was something there to learn – something that had merit – something to bring back to Hudson Valley and try. Every time he went away, we knew that when he returned there would be some new initiative and venture we would be undertaking.

His intellect and his curiosity helped fuel his ideas but there was something more than that as well. Doc had an uncanny ability to see what couldn’t be seen. He used to joke with me all the time and say that he had ESP because he so often predicted things that would happen before they actually did. Whether it was ESP, good research, or just a God given gift of intuition – Doc could see what needed to happen and he knew precisely what we needed to do to be in the game. For him, it was never enough for us to respond to the world around us – he wanted us to be ahead of the curve — to be the ones to make the impact – to lead the way – for others to follow. He knew that to help us see his vision he would have to lead by example.

We often speak about how Dr. Bulmer raised the level of technology at the college from a handful of computers to a campus with technology fully integrated in both its classrooms and its operations. Doc knew early on that technology would be the future. He also knew that because it was new and different and sometimes a little challenging, he needed to show us that it wasn’t as difficult as we imagined. And so, at the forefront of the technology movement was Dr. Bulmer himself using instructional technology systems to provide multimedia presentations whenever he gave a speech – whether it was on or off campus. He knew that if he could show all of us that even the college president could learn to use this new fangled technology, then certainly the rest of us could learn to use it as well.

Doc was the consummate teacher and that is when he was happiest – when he was helping others to learn. While Doc served for many years as an adjunct professor at both RPI and Union College, his role as teacher and mentor did not end when he left those
classrooms. Every opportunity was a potential learning experience for those around him and he relished opportunities to offer us his own unique insights into education and management. He saw the potential in each of us and found ways to develop that potential. He knew what we were capable of becoming and he helped to show us how to unleash that potential. He was not just our boss and our leader – he was our mentor.

In the 1980’s, Doc was involved in helping the college to construct a new marketing slogan. Since he saw the college as a leader in the education field, our ad campaign carried the slogan “Learn with A Leader.” He loved driving around and seeing the billboards with that slogan on it but yet he knew there was something more that could be said.

The next year, the billboards looked almost the same but the word “A” was crossed out and above it was written the word “The.” The new slogan was “Learn with THE Leader.” A modest change in wording but a significant change in meaning.

When I reflect back on this slogan it says a lot more to me than its original intent. Yes, those who come to the Hudson Valley still learn with a leading educational institution. But more importantly, those of us who had the honor and the privilege of working with Dr. Bulmer know that we were the ones that got to learn – not just with “a” leader but with “The” leader.

And what did we learn?

- We learned that you must inspect what you expect – don’t assume what you think will happen will actually happen – make sure that it does.

- We learned that we must ask the next question – the real answer isn’t the first one we hear, nor even the second or third – we must learn to dig deeper if we really want to understand.

- We learned that you never want to be too comfortable – comfort takes away your drive and your edge.

- We learned that you have to get out of the office if you want to know what is going on – that you have to listen to what the people say --you have to look around and keep your ears open.

- We learned that prior planning prevents poor performance, but we also learned the benefits of potential problem analysis.

- We learned the importance of follow up and feedback and to be prepared for mid course corrections,

- We learned that it is all about accountability.
• We learned that if you want to be a manager you have to act like one --that to lead you have to make decisions and accept responsibility, to admit when you are wrong and that a little humility doesn’t hurt.

• We learned that no matter what happens the first question to ask ourselves is “What did we learn from this?”

• We learned that we are all here for the same reason and that we have to keep our priorities straight.

• We learned that we have to let the world know what we are doing, because, in his words “we have a good thing going here.”

There were a million of them. We used to call them “Bulmerisms.” They were our daily reminders from Doc and when I say daily, I mean daily. There wasn’t a day that went by when we didn’t hear most if not all of his sayings. For those that worked most closely with him, these daily lessons were the best Ph.D. in management you could earn.

For the past 30 years, I have cherished a plaque that I keep in my office with a quote on it from George Bernard Shaw. Dr. Bulmer always loved to include a good quote in his speeches. I think this one is most appropriate for it sums up everything there is to say about Dr. Bulmer. The plaque reads.

\[
\text{Life is no brief candle to me} \\
\text{It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment} \\
\text{And I want to make it burn as brightly as possible} \\
\text{Before handing it on to future generations}
\]

I could think of no better way to sum up the life and the impact of Joe Bulmer.

He was a great man who did things in a big way. He took the light that God had given him and he made it burn as brightly as possible. When he was with us the world was magnificently lit. But he knew that it was his responsibility to pass that light on to those who would be here after he left us.

He has passed that torch on to his six children, his 10 grandchildren, his myriad of colleagues and friends. He has passed that torch on to each of us.

• It is our turn to let what he has taught us shine in a way that lights the world around us.

• It is our turn to be teacher and mentor to others.

• It is our turn to fuel the torch that we will pass down to those who will come after us.
In doing so, the flame of Joseph J. Bulmer will always light the world. Thanks, Doc, for lighting the way.

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