

Khayat on Leadership

Originally published in *Mississippi Business Journal*

Great leaders often serve at a pivot point in an organization's history. A great leader is truly the right person at the right time in the right place. I am always impressed by leaders who are reluctant to serve, but through time and circumstance are pressed into service. Some of the great leaders in history were people who weren't seeking glory or fame, but were willing to serve when called. As a student of leadership, I'm always looking for opportunities to visit with great leaders and learn from their experiences.

Robert C. Khayat, Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Mississippi, is one of those leaders. Chancellor Khayat, the recent recipient of the Mississippi Technology Alliance's 2010 Legends Award, is well-known for his leadership at Ole Miss from 1995-2009. As a law professor at the University, he was considered for the role as Dean of the Law School, but that was not meant to be. Soon thereafter, when Gerald Turner retired, Khayat's name resurfaced as a potential candidate for the Chancellor position. He was reluctant to consider the opportunity, but as fate would have it, he was appointed the 15th Chancellor of the state's oldest university. His many accomplishments during his leadership included the creation of the Sally McDonnell Honors College, The William Winter Institute of Racial Reconciliation, the Croft Institute for International Studies, and the establishment of a chapter of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa honor society. In addition, he led the first major capital campaign in the school's history raising more than \$900 million during his tenure, and hosted the 2008 Presidential debate which brought worldwide attention to our state.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to visit with Chancellor Khayat and learn some lessons on leadership from him. First, I learned how he stepped into a challenging situation and immersed himself in his new role. He emphasized that, "I stressed how important it was for everyone to take pride in the institution and everyone's individual role in making Ole Miss a great public university." In other words, he began to cast a vision and raise the bar. He helped the University lift its sights and focus on what it could be versus what its limitations were. He then focused his organization around a mission. He believes that a good mission statement is 25 words or less and is memorable. In his words, "You have to know who you are." This means that you're candid in your assessment and realistic in your aspirations.

He then gathered extensive suggestions on how to improve the school which ended up producing 126 suggestions which they narrowed down to 21 potential goals. Rather than be goal diffused, he and his leadership team further narrowed it down to seven key goals which became the center point of their strategy. Anyone who has undertaken this kind of goal setting knows that it's no easy task. It can be terribly difficult to separate the great from the good. However, it was exactly this kind of effort and focus that allowed the University to accomplish the major milestones listed above.

Attracting talent to an organization is always a challenge. Khayat was very purposeful in always trying to surround himself with people more talented than himself. Great leaders seek out the best of the best to be on their team and aren't fearful about being outshined. He also did everything he could to make Ole Miss a great place to work so he could attract top talent. Since he did not have an unlimited budget, he focused on quality of life issues to level the playing field with better-funded

colleges and universities. He also was an effective leader by delegating authority, sharing responsibility, and giving the credit to his team members.

When you're in a leadership role like Chancellor Khayat, it is easy to lose touch with the day-to-day operations of the organization. Every morning Khayat could be found getting his morning exercise by walking around the campus and picking up trash. In doing this, he was able to stay in touch with employees across the campus, and he knew them by name. He modeled respect for one another as a key value of the organization.

A values driven person, Khayat shared with me that he took the time while he was in law school at Yale to think deeply about his governing values, and he listed them out which served as his guide during his distinguished career. He also shared his four-fold decision making framework which helped him make the many difficult decisions he faced. First, he would gather the facts. He would seek out all available data on a decision to be made. Second, he would summon the courage to act. Third, he would make sure he had the energy and resources to implement the decision. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he would be at peace with his decision and move on.

While he has achieved great success in life, Chancellor Khayat has great humility and perspective. Regardless of your school affiliation, we all could learn a few things about leadership from Chancellor Khayat, and as Mississippians, we should all take pride in the success of our universities. While he may be retired from Ole Miss, I'm sure that we will continue to benefit from Chancellor Khayat's leadership and vision in the years to come as he contributes his time and effort in helping Mississippi be the best it can be.

Quick Facts:

Dr. Robert C. Khayat, Chancellor Emeritus, University of Mississippi

First Job: "I had the first power lawnmower in Moss Point. At age 10, I bought an 18" Toro power lawnmower for \$100 on 100% credit. I paid for it in about six weeks cutting yards."

Favorite Books: Good to Great (Jim Collins); I enjoy the works of Thomas Merton and Frederick Buechner

Proudest Moment as a Leader: "I am always encouraged when I see tomorrow's leaders excel. When the University was going through a challenging time about the flag, a young student named John Joseph who was Student Body President publicly supported the change with the flag. This took tremendous courage and the students followed his lead."

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