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# Nebraska Lead XX Morning Meeting

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**NEBRASKA LEAD XX MORNING MEETING**
**MARCH 15, 2002**
**JOHN C. OWENS**
**NU VICE PRESIDENT AND HARLAN VICE CHANCELLOR, IANR**

Good morning.

I am delighted to be with you here this morning to offer my congratulations and my best wishes as you complete the LEAD program. This is a wonderful and significant accomplishment, and I certainly hope you all are celebrating and savoring it. I look forward with enthusiasm to watching your future contributions as leaders in agriculture, in your local communities, in Nebraska, and in our global community.

I'd like to start my remarks this morning with one question: How many people in this room have ridden an elephant? Show of hands?

Believe me, I can't ask that question in every room I go into! Or if I do, I'm going to get some very strange looks, because not everyone has had that experience. You have. As members of LEAD XX you've had so *many* experiences that others never have the opportunity to draw upon. Wonderful, thought-provoking, exhilarating, growth-promoting experiences. Experiences that may change forever how you view your world.

I know about your elephant rides because I've had the opportunity to read

LEAD Fellow Lori Potter's newspaper series on LEAD XX's study/travel seminar in Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. The names of some of the places you've been – Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Lampang – are treats just to say, let alone visit!

Lori described riding an elephant this way:

*"Riding an elephant is similar to being in the back seat of an oversized, slow-moving truck going down a poorly-maintained road. First it feels as if the entire right side of the vehicle has dropped into a pothole. As that side recovers, it then feels as if the left side has dropped into another hole.*

*"Despite the lack of speed or finesse involved, a ride through the grounds of Thai Elephant Conservation Center near Lampang is exhilarating."*

The ponderous, rolling motion as the elephant moves across the land; the perspective gained from your special perch on the elephant's back, as opposed to walking on the ground; the thrill of hearing another elephant's trumpet echo across the elephant park. These all are part of your experience now.

Personally, I think that elephant-ride Lori described is a good metaphor for many of the experiences of being a leader. My own life's lessons show that sometimes, when you lead, movement forward seems so ponderous, the road so filled with potholes, that you wonder if you ever will get to your destination. Yet when you stop to look back you find, as I'm sure you did in the elephant park, that

what seemed like slow movement actually has brought you quite a distance in what is not, in the full scheme of the universe, any time at all.

My hero, Abraham Lincoln, once put it this way: "I am a slow walker," he said, "but I never walk backwards."

That doesn't mean there aren't sometimes circuitous routes toward a goal, or detours along the way, but as long as those routes and detours take you forward, it all counts. I try to remember that during times I am frustrated by the snail's pace at which we sometimes move toward a goal I can see so clearly, and I urge you to remember it, too.

At other times, of course, as leaders we may feel events are occurring at tremendous speed. Change comes so fast that we barely can catch our breath as we plunge onward with the people working with us, the people depending upon us, and the people looking to us to help get them safely through.

Certainly the revenue shortfall now facing Nebraska must have many people feeling that way; I know I do. Every day – sometimes it feels as if it's every hour – new information and new twists seem to emerge. I know many of Nebraska's leaders are doing their very best to steer our state safely through these rough times. Here at the university we are doing our best to help, also, and we appreciate the support of the many Nebraskans who have voiced their belief in the importance of

the university's role in growing the state's economy, and in finding answers to Nebraskans' concerns and problems. Sunday the *Lincoln Journal-Star* carried an editorial supporting the Appropriations Committee's actions in this next round of budget cuts to limit the damage to the university budget to 1 percent. That differs from the governor's proposed 3 percent budget cut. The *Journal-Star* noted the university's role as a key resource for Nebraska. We are especially appreciative of Nebraskans' support for their university.

Perspective is vital for leaders. When you're on top of an elephant, you get a totally different perspective than you get standing on the ground. Leaders need to keep that in mind, to remember that how people view something often depends on the angle from which they view it. Perspective helps us, also, to be open to ideas and the strengths and weaknesses each contains, and to be respectful and understanding of differences. I know that in the past two years you have had many opportunities, as LEAD fellows, to broaden your perspective, to explore ideas, to meet and hear from people with different views and different gifts, [redacted] and to develop an even-greater appreciation for that, plus an even-greater understanding of situations critical to each of us, to all Nebraskans, to our country, and to our world.

You've traveled the state and you've visited key areas in this nation. You've

been abroad; you've no doubt examined, as I have, what it means to be a leader in the wake of September 11. While I think these qualities always are vital, we need now, perhaps more than ever, leaders with wisdom, compassion, dedication, and courage; leaders who can take the long view while working through the day-to-day issues and needs that will get us there.

One of the things I think is true of all real leaders is captured in three words by Albert Schweitzer: "Example is leadership." We all look to example. Enthusiasm is infectious, and my experience is that most people don't mind – and even enjoy – working hard, if their leader is working right alongside them.

In the past two years, you've worked alongside each other, giving of your time and talents as LEAD fellows, and I have no doubt you will continue to give of your time and talents as leaders in years to come. I know those who have invested between $10,000 and $12,000 in each LEAD fellow present today have every right to expect a significant return on their investment, and I think they will see it.

One of the things I enjoy most each time I travel across Nebraska is meeting LEAD alumni, and now you will be among them – people helping chart the future of Nebraska agriculture, contributing to Nebraska's communities, and putting to good use the skills you've honed here. I am so pleased that the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources has been committed to the Nebraska LEAD program for

over 20 years now, providing office space and, more important, the salary and benefits for Director Dr. Allen Blezek, who, for this program is the person who is "key" to Nebraska's future. I thank you, Allen, for your dedication and your leadership in building this wonderful program.

LEAD XX fellows, congratulations. I look forward to working with you in the future. I'd like "to leave" you all today with the words of the late anthropologist Margaret Mead, who said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is "the only thing" that ever has."

Thank you.

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