

The Importance of Leadership:

Insights from Major Business Leaders in Maine

by Linda Silka

Although a small state, Maine has many innovative business leaders who care deeply about the issue of leadership and who have devoted considerable thought to the role of business leadership for the state's economic well-being. In March of this year, as part of the University of Maine's Faculty Fellow Program,¹ the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center hosted a discussion between cutting-edge Maine business leaders and

the 2017–2018 class of faculty fellows. Three of these leaders generously agreed to be interviewed and to share their ideas and insights on leadership for this special issue of *Maine Policy Review*. They were asked a series of questions about their own experiences in leadership and what they see as emerging challenges or opportunities that leaders face in Maine.



Susan Corbett is the chief executive officer for Axiom Technologies. She is a preeminent authority on rural broadband deployment and works closely with economic development and rural organizations to advance internet and wire-

less technologies and their adoption. Corbett's clear company-wide direction has garnered Axiom recognition in the form of awards, media coverage, and grants. Most recently, Axiom was awarded a Microsoft grant to provide internet access to homes in Washington County, Maine, using TV white space. In the fall of 2017, Ms. Corbett launched the National Digital Equity Center, collaborating with local and global change makers, relentlessly driving disruptive strategies to close the digital divide in Maine and across the United States.



Kimberly A. Hamilton is the president of Focus Maine. Prior to assuming the presidency of Focus Maine, she was the chief impact officer at Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization, where she led research, nutrition, and ending-hunger programs. Hamilton has

served in a variety of senior roles at Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, including director of strategy, planning and management for global policy and advocacy. During her time with the foundation, she also led grant-making programs and developed advocacy strategies to advance the foundation's goals in a variety of fields. Hamilton has also worked for NetAid, the Migration Policy Institute, and a variety of other think tanks and philanthropic organizations.



Peter Triandafillou is the vice president of Woodlands for Huber Resources Corporation. Triandafillou is responsible for J.M. Huber's timber management business. He has worked at HRC for 20 years and in the forest products

industry for 37 years. Triandafillou and his team are responsible for the management of approximately 650,000 acres of timberland in Maine, Wisconsin, New York, Oklahoma, Texas, and Georgia for a variety of clients including families, individuals, timber investment management organizations, and conservation organizations. Triandafillou also manages Huber's policy work in Maine and holds board positions at Farm Credit East, Farm Credit Council, the Maine Forest Products Council, and the Forest Society of Maine.

FRAMING QUESTIONS FOR BUSINESS LEADER INTERVIEWS

- Do you have a story or two about a leadership challenge you encountered and how you addressed that challenge?
- Of your leadership successes, which are you most proud?
- Are there things you wish you had known before you took on various leadership roles?
- What emerging opportunities do you see in Maine? Obstacles? What does this suggest to you about our state's future leadership needs?
- Are there certain leaders in Maine whom you see as being especially important models?
- What skills will future leaders need and how best can we prepare future leaders to have these skills?

RAPID CHANGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

All three leaders highlighted change and the fact that things are changing so fast in their responses. Triandafillou noted that things are changing faster and faster, which he captured in a vivid example. He described recently buying a 1980ish Volkswagen van. The 1980s didn't seem that long ago to him, yet he couldn't believe how much things have changed in automotive technology. Corbett noted that all technology will be old in five years. She thinks that everyone will need to develop analytical skills and skills that can grow, that no matter the occupation and industry, everyone will need digital skills. These ideas raise the important question, What is our plan for digital equity to ensure everyone can develop the skills needed for this changing economy? Hamilton agreed with the others that change is happening faster than ever before. She believes that strategies used to move businesses forward will need to be refreshed more often. Talent will need to stay on top of new skills, and our institutions of higher learning will need to respond to everfaster cycles of change to adapt and grow with these challenges.

Much of the commentary by all three leaders pointed out that Maine faces some particular challenges in these times of change. Pointing to demographic

and opportunity gaps, Hamilton noted that we are at a pivotal moment in Maine, facing demographic and related labor force challenges coupled with the widening income and opportunity gap that have grown. These combined forces create a difficult environment for any leader.

At the same time, the interviewees also described emerging opportunities that come with the change. Hamilton noted that her organization sees tremendous opportunity in Maine in areas related to the food economy, including agriculture and aquaculture.

Corbett also talked about the rich opportunities in Maine that people too often fail to see. She described moving up from Massachusetts in 1998 and finding opportunities here that she would not have had in Massachusetts. Contrary to what many people believe, Corbett finds that the rural context encourages opportunities as there is not a lot of competition. She sees opportunities to focus on digital literacy and work with small businesses. Triandafillou noted that people sometimes draw the wrong conclusions. For example, many people think the forestry industry is dead. But, the industry is anything but dead, and there is still a robust forest economy in Maine. Although there may no longer be mills on the Penobscot, the state does have a dark night sky, which offers new tourism opportunities, and great forests with rich markets nearby. Because forest products are heavy and expensive to transport, the fact that Maine forests are close to major markets is a distinct advantage.

Triandafillou also noted, for some key industries, change might be more subtle. In some parts of the forestry industry many of the big changes are changes in ownership. The traditional culture of industrial timber ownership was dominated by the paper industry and timber families with long-term horizons. But the paper industry divested of its timberlands in the 1980s and 1990s, and was replaced by a variety of institutional investors. These owners have a shorter time horizon that may seem contrary to timber's long-term nature. However, all owners need returns, and they thus have an interest in the long-term value of their property. Because of this, while the owners have changed, the culture and management has changed only slightly. This transition can still be hard. Triandafillou offered a story about a leadership challenge that involved the need to give up control when a landowner sells timberland to another entity. Understandably, he said, his employees, who depend

on that forest for their jobs, can find the transition difficult. So do the owners who have made long-term investment in their forests. They worry, “Will the new owners treat the land with the same care?” “Will we still be the ones managing the forest?” In his leadership role, he empowered his employees to be professional and part of the transition process, which helped ensure their continued role in the management of the forest.

THE KIND OF LEADERSHIP THAT WILL BE NEEDED

Asked for their reflections on leaders in Maine, they pointed to Maine’s history of great leaders from whom we can all learn. They noted that Maine has received great press in the past for its leaders and continues to draw national attention for the leadership strengths in the state. They mentioned Senators William Cohen, Susan Collins, Angus King, George Mitchell, and Olympia Snowe. One important characteristic that was noted was the capacity of these Maine leaders to reach across the aisle.

Triandafillou noted that he heard Senator King give a talk in which the senator mentioned that members of Congress no longer stay in Washington, DC, on weekends. They travel home every weekend now, which was not the case in the past. One result, King said, was that the two sides rarely socialize and get to know each other. King didn’t wait for someone else to solve this problem, however; he started hosting dinners in which half of the guests were Democrats and half were Republican. The goal was just to share and learn from each other and it worked to build relationships.

Corbett also called attention to the importance of local and state leaders to Maine’s successes. She noted the leaders of Maine’s many foundations and colleges and universities. Corbett was struck by how much they support, instead of compete against, each other. She believes this collaboration is important if we are to make progress in Maine. In some systems, people do not understand the importance of collaborative leadership. In the health care industry, where Corbett began her work, she observed a lot of innovative collaboration. As she moved to other fields, however she saw less collaboration. Corbett looked for ways to increase the collaboration and often started dialogues by asking providers why they were not collaborating. She has served as an important resource in developing collaborative strategies.

All three interviewees noted that collaboration is increasingly important in both the public and private sectors. According to Hamilton, FocusMaine is a great model of collaborative leadership. She noted that FocusMaine has brought together many of Maine’s most accomplished private-sector leaders around a shared goal to create 20,000 jobs in the state. The model is important because the leadership team checks their specific industry interests at the door and musters their own experience, own wisdom, and passion for the state of Maine. Together, this team has learned about new issues beyond their day-to-day areas of interest, listened to stakeholders, and used that knowledge to chart a path toward job growth working with partners to implement the vision. This kind of leadership, Hamilton noted, is not easy. It’s collaborative, but there are tough conversations. It’s built on a shared vision, but with clear accountability. Most importantly, it’s time bound, which means that urgency is a part of the DNA.

The leaders pointed out that some leadership skills always seem highly necessary. Hamilton noted that there are perennial leadership characteristics that all leaders need to master: the power of saying “No,” skill at stepping into adversity, the ability to embrace diversity, and the recognition that urgency matters. Corbett pointed to the importance of being willing to be a risk taker. She is a risk taker and feels that it has been important to her success to be able to take reasonable risks. All three leaders alluded to the importance of resilience in successful leaders as tough times are to be expected. In the face of those tough times, what strategies will be needed to build up resilience?

The interviewees considered emerging leadership issues that are increasingly important for the future. Some of the issues they see as important include how to increase educational attainment, how to help small businesses provide health care to employees, and how to improve access to broadband particularly in rural areas.

WHERE DOES ONE LEARN LEADERSHIP SKILLS?

The leaders were asked their thoughts about how they came to develop or learn their leadership skills and what kinds of training or experiences should we as a state try to provide. Their thoughtful responses added many interesting points. One set of responses had to do with the value and importance of mentoring and providing mentoring opportunities. Hamilton noted

that there is nothing better than actual experience coupled with reflection and great mentoring support to grow one's own leadership style. Even having had much success as a leader, Hamilton still finds it important to consult some of her most influential mentors on tough issues. She pointed out the value of different perspectives on solving important challenges. According to Hamilton, "we often hear that it's lonely at the top. I rather think of leadership as a team sport."

Concerning the cultivation of leadership skills, the interviewees acknowledged the importance of starting early. Hamilton noted that there is growing awareness that some leadership skills can be cultivated from an early age. Yet, opportunities to learn leadership skills may not be equally available across the state. Corbett feels state leaders need to consider how to encourage and support leadership training opportunities in rural areas.

The leaders pointed out that Maine has organizations that offer great professional leadership development training. Corbett described the Maine Development Foundation's statewide program, Leadership Maine and Sunrise County Economic Development's Washington County Leadership Institute, as two examples. Through these programs, local and regional leaders are learning how to network. Corbett noted how helpful it might be if young people were introduced to network training in high school or college.

ENLARGED VIEWS OF LEADERSHIP

The leaders were asked whether there was anything they wished they had known before they moved into leadership positions. They all said, "Of course!" Hamilton remarked that this was something one can only know in hindsight. She pointed out that with each new leadership opportunity one asks better questions, but there are always challenges. Part of taking on new leadership roles, she said, is having the confidence that you can manage through the unknowns.

Corbett pointed out that leaders can be of many sorts, and we need to learn from these differences. Staff who lead from behind are often the engines and are important leaders. Thus, we may need to redefine what we mean by the term *leaders*. Corbett believes that business leaders and employers have a responsibility to invest in staff so that they will be ready for leadership. Leaders sometimes worry that if they invest in staff training, then the staff will leave. She counters with "What if you don't train them and they stay?"

Leadership calls for an array of different skills. Although many see leaders as just telling people what to do, Hamilton emphasized that leaders need to be listeners and learners. According to Hamilton, no one can possibly have all the answers, but we all have an endless capacity to learn, to assess, to incorporate new findings. Leading means listening more and talking less.

Triandafillou added that we can't really know beforehand what type of leadership will be needed. He believes that leadership is about jumping in, going where angels fear to tread. According to Triandafillou, "Someone said what differentiates good leaders from others is that they are 'able to look around the corners and see what's coming; look around corners.'"

Leadership challenges come in all sizes. For Hamilton, the best advice she ever received came from Doris Meissner, the former commissioner of the then US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). As Hamilton was taking on her first executive director role, Meissner told her that many of the decisions one needs to make as a leader are "51/49," meaning that there isn't a decisive path. In these situations, judgment matters. It is important to weigh both sides and make a decision that allows the team to move on. There are always consequences to decisions that can't be foreseen, but it is important to manage through.

CONCLUSION

Maine is fortunate to be home to great leaders who can guide us all as we move through changing times. As we look across the various articles on leadership in this issue, we see the many changes that are occurring and the opportunities and challenges they represent. Guidance and insights from leaders such as Susan Corbett, Kimberly Hamilton, and Peter Triandafillou point to ways we can prepare for those changes. 🐟

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Faculty Fellows Program, coordinated by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, creates a network of trained faculty leaders who can communicate the importance of UMaine and their research to Maine citizens and organizations. The fellows serve as ambassadors to the legislature, business, and wider community. They are selected from departments across campus and are trained in core leadership and communication skills.