

## NEWSROOM

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## '50 YEARS IN 50 MINUTES'

DR. BOB COLVIN REFLECTS ON LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP IN FINAL LECTURE.

by [Kelley McGee](#) | March 31, 2025*Read time: about 9 min*

Dr. Bob Colvin stepped behind the lectern one last time in front of a packed house at the Diamonstein Concert Hall to deliver a heartfelt and inspired lecture he titled, “50 years in 50 minutes.” More than 1,000 President’s Leadership Program (PLP) students – past and present – along with University leadership, colleagues and family gathered in person, with many more joining via livestream, to honor Colvin’s remarkable career at Christopher Newport and the legacy of leadership he will leave behind.

Dr. Colvin, one of the visionary founders and the inaugural chair of the Department of Leadership and American Studies, has served Christopher Newport in key leadership roles for 27 years and the Commonwealth for nearly 50 years. He plans to retire at the end of the year. His final lecture, delivered with his signature wit, warmth and humility, reflected back on his storied career of “observing, questioning, practicing, learning, researching, writing and teaching about leadership.”

Following his lecture, Colvin was joined on stage by two of his former students – PLP Director Lacey Grey Hunter and Leadership Professor Lori Throupe – for an engaging discussion and student-led Q&A session. Throughout the evening, Colvin reflected on some memorable classroom experiences, facilitated thoughtful discussions on theory and practice, and emphasized the importance of leadership as a core value at Christopher Newport. He also hinted



at what is ahead for him when he steps down from his current role as CNU's Vice-President for Strategic Initiatives at the end of 2025.

"I really don't know what is next and that is incredibly exciting to me. Maybe I'll do some consulting work, some lobbying, or perhaps I'll write a book about leadership. I do know when I leave in December, I will have left it all on the field, and I hope you always do the same," Colvin said. "Thank you for bringing me so much joy in the classroom."

## DR. BOB COLVIN LAST LECTURE ON LEADERSHIP

"50 years in 50 minutes"

Wednesday 26 March 2025

Thank you, Stephany for the very kind introduction. I am honored that you agreed to fill that role!

I want to acknowledge President William Kelly and First Lady Angie Kelly tonight, along with Christy Morton, the Rector of the Board of Visitors, who serve as leaders in my life.

I also want to acknowledge President Emeritus Paul Tribble and First Lady Rosemary Tribble, Former President Adelia Thompson, and First Gentleman Lynn Thompson, who could not attend tonight, but who send their warm regards to all.

THANK YOU, President Kelly, for inviting me to offer these comments tonight and for your steadfast dedication to leadership development as a key value and distinctive for CNU and increasingly across CNU!

THANK YOU, President Tribble, for your vision and determination in creating PLP and the Department of Leadership Studies, which made my contributions to CNU even possible.

Thank you, former students of mine, for coming tonight and for the many who let me know you are watching the live stream. You demonstrate that you are tough by your willingness to endure yet another lecture after graduating, so thank you!

Thank you to all of the current students here tonight, about a thousand of you, for being part of this amazing PLP program. YOU are the reason this program was created 27 years ago. You, like those who went before you in this program, will be a force-multiplier for good.

Over the years, a number of former students have let me know how much their leadership development at CNU meant in their personal and professional lives. Yes, their major course of study was important, but building that toolkit to engage in leadership was pivotal. Several former students said that in early job interviews, the interviewers shifted completely to asking about the PLP and the leadership studies academic courses. The interviewers seemed intrigued and pleased that such a program exists.

As Stephany said, tonight's session is titled "50 Years in 50 Minutes: The Last Lecture." In many different roles, it has been a great adventure helping shape leaders of tomorrow. So, what can I share from the past 50-plus years, in the course of about 50 minutes, that will help you in YOUR next 50 years? Honestly, only the tiny tip of the iceberg. So, I will begin with a few reflections on PLP and Leadership Studies and then offer some suggestions on the leadership process.

### WHY STUDY LEADERSHIP?

Nearly all significant human progress has been a function of leading and following. The leadership process is the "causation" piece of understanding history. It is a subject that has drawn the attention of some of the greatest thinkers in recorded history.

Still, should we bother studying how leadership works? Are not leaders born rather than made? Well, yes, every single leader that I ever met had been born!

These seemingly "natural leaders" adopt styles based on several leaders they have observed. But, why not employ a more systematic approach to studying the factors of effective leadership with a much broader reach? Why be limited to modeling only several people? One major research project that I conducted examined the leadership



practices of 4,454 executives as they were evaluated over a five-year period by more than 40,000 direct reports and peer executives, to determine what transformational leadership practices were more effective.

Let's talk about practicing leadership. Regardless of their starting point, people who become better leaders practice leadership. The classroom part of learning leadership can lay the foundation for understanding how leadership works and offer recommended approaches. So, it is like taking lessons to play a musical instrument. We can learn a lot about the instrument and how to play it from the instructor. But, we must practice, learn, and practice.

Hence, the PLP was built to walk on two feet. One is academic study in classes with professors, the other is application, practice, and reflection led by talented PLP staff. What a powerful combination.

## SO, WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

As our students know from their classes, leadership is a PROCESS that involves followers, context, and leaders-- with both moral and motivational elements. I will offer my advice on each of those in sequence.

But, first, a disclaimer: We are only human. Even at our very best, we are fallible and NOT perfect. So, when I offer you some tips on leading (and following), I do so knowing that many times I have not been my best self as a leader.

But, you and I can pick what we want to improve and then check regularly to see how we are doing! Here are some ideas:

### FIRST IS FOLLOWERSHIP.

On a given day, we are likely to be following as much or more than leading! I certainly am.

So, here is the main point: Be a critical consumer of leadership. If the leader and the leadership process is toxic and/or not ethical, or clearly contrary to your values, then either try to fix it or get out.

Turning to a more positive note, BE the kind of follower that matches the kind of leader you would want. Be ethical, be honest, be authentic, and give your best. Isn't that what we ask of our leaders? Be the kind of follower that empowers and creates good leaders.

### SECOND IS CONTEXT.

Context is vitally important. As a former police officer and police patrol supervisor, I experienced first-hand that leading needs to adapt to the circumstances.

For routine matters, a very participative approach makes good sense. However, when executing an emergency search of a location at 2 a.m. for a potentially armed and violent felon, the approach would move to a much more directive style. These "emergency" modes are very different contexts than deciding how to arrange the vacation schedule for the patrol shifts. But, enough of that, let's move on to cultural context.

The practical leadership tips I'm going to relay to you in just a few moments should work well in a Western culture, like in the US. As you will learn if you take Dr. Tian's Cross-Cultural Leadership class, not every Western approach translates equally well into other cultures.

Here is an oversimplified example. If you get a corporate job with Starbucks (I LOVE coffee and caffeine) and you have an initial meeting with your new team on day one, culture will matter to your approach. In the US, it may go very well to seek out their opinions and insights on day one. In contrast, if you are assigned to work in a high power-distance society, like China, those team members may wonder if you know how to do your job if you are asking them how to do it on day one. Yes, eventually ask them, but timing and manner are important. So, cultural context and followers' expectations are important.

Indeed, we live in a global society. You very likely engage with cross-cultural teams in your careers over YOUR next 50 years, so you need to pay attention to cultural influences.

### THIRD IS LEADING.

I see two main parts of the PROCESS of leading:

1. Establishing a focal point or purpose; (Moral reasoning)
2. Influencing others to help achieve the purpose because they genuinely want to do it. (Motivation).

To lead is to go first and show the way.

At the outset, I will recommend FOUR models to you as good resources, and these all are flexible enough for different followers and contexts. So, yes, do your homework to check these out!

First is Transforming Leadership (2003) by political scientist James Macgregor Burns for the moral aspects—and the importance of the follower role. Burns was one of my two mentors in the field of Leadership Studies and I loved learning from him.

Second is Transformational Leadership by Bernard Bass, who was an organizational psychologist. Bass studied Burns' original work (1978) and then wrote his original book (1985) to translate Burn's political and societal leadership ideas to a model to use in organizations.

You may recall the four components:

- Idealized Influence
- Inspirational Motivation
- Intellectual Stimulation
- Individualized Consideration

Third is Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner's Five Practices of Excellent Leadership. These can be found in their book "The Leadership Challenge." The five practices are:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

There are two steps under each of those five practices, and they provide a helpful guide to practicing transformational leadership.

Fourth, I will immodestly offer my own emerging conceptual model. I am going to steer us through what I titled "Sailing the Seven C's of Leadership."

The 7 Cs of Leadership are Courage, Credibility, Conviction, Commitment, Creativity, Clarity, and Consideration.

- Courage is the first of the Seven C's of Leadership. The intro music tonight was Highway to the Danger Zone by Kenny Loggins and it was the theme song for the film Top Gun. As a FAA licensed airplane pilot myself, that song always appealed to me. But, it also makes sense in leadership. Leadership requires the courage to step out of one's comfort zone and into something new and uncertain, making tough decisions, being questioned about your wisdom, persuading others to join you on that adventure, and facing the fact that some or many will reject you. Courage also requires us, as managers, to invite folk to find other pursuits if they are not doing their job well--and cannot or will not improve. And, some people may come to NOT like you!
- Credibility is the second C. To follow someone, you and I have to let down our guard, at least a little. And, how much I let down my guard depends on my view of the competence, intent, and veracity of the person attempting to lead. If we do not believe the messenger, we are less likely to believe their message. Therefore, lead by example and never by exception.
- Conviction is the third C. It means that the leader is genuinely persuaded of the moral grounding of the purpose and direction. This means the leader is truly convicted of the rightness of the purpose. People will know if you are convicted—or not. Bass ultimately realized that leadership must be authentic.
- Commitment is the fourth C. My mentor in the Virginia political realm was the late House Speaker A.L. Philpott. I had stayed at his home in Henry County and we were driving back to the State Capitol the next day. I asked him what ONE piece of advice he would offer to me as I pursued my career. He said, "When you commit to something, stick to it no matter how much it costs you, and do NOT commit until you know what you are doing." Do not make promises you cannot keep. Also important to remember is that commitment (or lack thereof) is contagious among your followers.
- Creativity is the fifth C of Leadership. As my dear friend, leadership Prof Nathan Harter, wrote in one of his

books, “Every episode of leadership begins in the imagination.” Imagine the future. Create an adventure. Then create a VISION of where you are headed. What is the journey and destination, and why? Your vision must be an expression of your VALUES—your WHY. And the selection of values is the moral reasoning element in how Burns saw transforming leadership.

- Clarity is the sixth C. Clarity is essential in communication. As President Kelly says, we must communicate 7 times in 7 ways and be consistent in our messaging. Be crystal clear and consistent in your messaging. Clarity in your expectations of others is an act of kindness (credit Mr. Gill).
- Consideration is the seventh and final C. I mean this in terms of the Individualized Consideration from Bass’s model. That means showing high emotional intelligence and investing in relationships. Someone said, “They will not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”  
So, we have sailed the 7 Cs of Leadership.

If you sail those 7 Cs, along with the Burns approach, Bass model and the Kouzes and Posner model, you will be off to a very good start.

To wrap up this Last Lecture part of the program, I offer the following general tips:

1. Do not mistake silence for agreement or understanding
2. People want a sense of control over their destiny and want their lives to have meant something. Great leaders leverage these two motives. Tombstone dash (38 Special – Hold on Loosely from 1981) Here is a rough translation:  
*Hold on loosely*  
*But don't let go*  
*If you cling too tightly*  
*You're gonna lose control*  
*They need someone to believe in*  
*And a whole lot of space to breathe in*
3. We are not likely to be well remembered in life for the excellent quality of our excuses.
4. We cannot wait for all the traffic lights to turn green before starting our trip. We will encounter red and yellow lights. We will manage them.

Finally, and in summary:

- Be the leader you would want to follow.
- Be the follower you would want to lead.
- Leadership Matters!
- You’ve got this! If not you, then who?

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I have the good fortune to call on two cherished friends to help with the next part of tonight’s program.

PLP Director Lacey Grey Hunter and CNU Leadership Studies Professor Lori Throupe are going to join me in a discussion on leadership for about the next 20 minutes. I first met them both as two remarkable 18-year-old students in my leadership classes. It warms my heart that they both have gone on in their careers to invest in helping others develop the ability to succeed in the leadership process.

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