

# Ripple Effects

Robert J. Birkenholz,

*The Ohio State University*

Distinguished Lecture, American Association for Agricultural Education

May 16, 2012

*Dr. Robert J. Birkenholz is a Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL) at The Ohio State University. In 2002, he was appointed Chair of the department and served in that administrative role for two terms. In 2009, Dr. Birkenholz returned to a full-time faculty position in the department where he helped guide the creation of the undergraduate, interdisciplinary minor in Leadership Studies. Dr. Birkenholz has co-authored one book and one book chapter, 41 peer reviewed journal articles, 53 refereed research papers, and numerous other scholarly publications. He has taught a variety of courses in Agricultural Education and Leadership at the undergraduate and graduate levels. He has advised 59 Master's and 23 doctoral degree graduates. Dr. Birkenholz served as President of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) and was inducted as an AAAE Fellow in 1998. He received the AAAE North Central Region Outstanding Agricultural Educator award in 2011. He has presented lectures on student-centered learning and leading change at the four state agricultural universities in India. He was recognized in 2008 as a Fellow in the Kellogg Food Systems Leadership Institute.*

Keywords: teacher influence, professional development, career development

Thank you for the honor and privilege to be with you here today to present the 2012 AAAE Distinguished Lecture. For the past 30 years I have looked forward to this part of the program with great anticipation. Each year I have tried to guess the identity of the speaker by surveying the crowd to anticipate who might have been selected to deliver the lecture. Most of the time I focus on the wrong person, and get surprised when the name of the speaker is finally revealed. This year the process was a little different for me. Although I didn't have to wait to learn the name of the speaker . . . I still experienced some anxious moments as Greg Thompson revealed hints about my identity.

When Greg called me last summer, I vividly recall that I was in a pontoon boat on Clear Lake in northern Iowa. The weather was perfect and I was enjoying a cold beverage as my niece steered the boat around the lake with several other family members aboard. I nearly had to pinch myself to make sure that I wasn't dreaming, because everything seemed so perfect . . . I thought that I surely must have died and

gone to heaven. However, Greg brought me back to my senses and assured me that I was not dreaming. Nevertheless, I feel very blessed to have been asked to present the Distinguished Lecture this year. This opportunity is somewhat of a "Bucket List" item for me, and I cannot fully express the depth of my gratitude for being asked to serve as the "Mystery Speaker." It is indeed both a daunting and humbling experience, as many of the past speakers have acknowledged.

For several years I have pondered the topic that I would speak on, if I were ever selected to present this lecture. However, after Greg's phone call, I felt compelled to focus on a topic that is very near and dear to my heart, and that is leadership. Not from an academic perspective, but more from a personal point of view.

I have selected the title of "Ripple Effects" for my talk based on an analogy that can be applied to the subject of leadership and especially how leaders influence others, through a ripple effect. However, before I delve into my comments this morning, I would be remiss if I

didn't say THANK YOU to a few people who have had a tremendous influence on my life, both personally and professionally.

First and foremost, I want to publicly acknowledge my life's partner – Pam Birkenholz. Pam has been my wife, friend, partner, cheerleader, confidant, and recently my nursemaid . . . in addition to being my very own personal financial planner . . . she frequently reminds me that I am her best customer! Last summer she surprised me at a park near our home in Dublin, Ohio where she had arranged for our two sons, their wives, and our four grandchildren to be present (along with one of her co-workers, who just happened to be an ordained minister) . . . and we renewed our wedding vows. This August we will celebrate our 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. One bit of trivia that Greg did not mention was that I asked Pam to marry me only two weeks after we first met in 1976. I want to take this opportunity to publicly acknowledge Pam for all of her love and support through all these years. Thank You! [Using American Sign Language, gestured to Pam: “eye, love, you,” a family custom when communicating with grandchildren on Skype.]

I also would like to express my gratitude to AAEE President-elect, Dr. Greg Thompson, who assumed a professional risk when he invited me to deliver the Distinguished Lecture this year. Greg has always been a great friend since we first met when he was a graduate student and I was on the faculty at the University of Missouri in the mid-1990's. Greg and his wife Rita are good friends, and we engage in friendly competition for “Grandparent of the Year” honors with regard to our adopted grandchildren, especially Josiah Velez who turns five this year. Pam and I had to transfer our grandparenting rights to Greg and Rita when Josiah's parents (Jonathan and Tracy Velez) left Ohio State and moved to Oregon State after graduate school a few years ago. Something similar occurred when Jon and Michelle Simonsen moved to the University of Missouri nearly two years ago with their two sons (Nick and Carter) . . . since then, Pam and I have experienced a void as pseudo-grandparents within our extended Ag Ed family. Jonathan Velez is not here as he and Tracy are home caring for Anna Joy who was

born two months ago. On a side note, I would also like to say Happy Birthday to Glenn Shinn who celebrated his birthday yesterday.

Next, I would like to express appreciation for three professional colleagues . . . although I don't believe any of them are present in the audience today . . . for each of them has served as a mentor to me at various points in my career. Although each of them served as professional role models, they also had a profound influence on my personal life as well. Dr. Alan Kahler was my doctoral program advisor at Iowa State University. Dr. Bob Stewart was a colleague on the faculty in agricultural education at the University of Missouri. Dr. L. H. Newcomb provided administrative leadership at the college and departmental levels at The Ohio State University. Each of these individuals, along with countless others too numerous to mention, have served as informal mentors, and as a result, directly influenced my life, both personally and professionally. I feel a deep sense of gratitude and would like to publicly thank each of them for their positive influence on me at various stages of my career.

The last group that I would like to thank includes some of you in the audience today. So before you begin to doze off, or start checking email and texts messages on your cell phones, please permit me to engage in an audience participation exercise. I ask those of you in the audience to stand and remain standing, if you were ever: (a) enrolled in a class that I taught, (b) were advised by me as an undergraduate or graduate student, or (c) had me serve as a member of your graduate program advisory committee. If you meet one or more of these three criteria, please stand and remain standing for a moment. As we look around the room, this group represents some of the people in our profession that I have had some direct contact, and potentially influenced their professional growth and development in some small way. Please know that my purpose for this exercise is not to inflate my own ego, for I know many of you in this room would have a much larger group of professional colleagues standing if you had made a similar request. My purpose here this morning is to illustrate the ripple effect that one person can have after just a few years in this

profession. Nevertheless, for those of you who are still seated, look around this room and please stand if you have either been taught or advised by any of the people who are already standing in the first group. Again, please stand and remain standing. This extended group illustrates the second wave of the ripple effect that occurs as faculty in our program work with students over a period of years. Henry Adams succinctly captured the essence of this concept with his quote: *Teachers affect eternity; you can never tell where their influence stops.* This is a visual illustration of the topic that I will address in my comments this morning, again, based on the title of Ripple Effects. Thank you for your involvement with this exercise. Feel free to take your seats.

Let me start this morning by establishing the general context for the topic. Each of us, in the daily routines of our lives, fulfills our roles and responsibilities with varying degrees of intentionality. We tend to be very purposeful and intentional with respect to our teaching, research, and outreach roles. But we may not fully recognize and appreciate the potential influence and impact that we have on those around us in less formal situations. As current or future faculty members, or as colleagues in other professional roles, we have numerous opportunities to interact with many people through our daily interactions. It is important that we recognize the enormous potential we have to motivate, guide, and influence our students, advisees, peers, and even our supervisors and administrators each and every day.

Although this lecture began with me expressing appreciation for those who have touched my life in the past, I am reminded of the legendary football coach at Ohio State, Woody Hayes, who has become a folk hero with regard to some of his philosophical principles. Woody believed that it was not so important to pay someone back for their good deeds that they have done . . . Coach Hayes believed in the power of Paying It Forward . . . Paying It Forward is what I hope to accomplish with each of you in the time that I have this morning. My goal is to Pay It Forward with regard to an important leadership concept that I learned

several years ago, hoping that I can create a ripple effect among you, which will subsequently ripple outward as you influence others around you back at home.

The key point of my message today is that we recognize the potential ripple effect that we have on those around us. Although we may only be able to observe the direct influence that we have on people in our immediate circles, we can also create circles of influence that ripple outwardly toward others, even though we may not have direct contact with them.

Another characteristic of the ripples that are created when you toss a stone into a body of water is that the concentric circles reflect a symmetrical balance, which can continue for a period of time and slowly fade away. However, if there are barriers present, the ripples tend to be short-lived and dissipate rather quickly. The ripple effect analogy can also be applied to our personal and professional lives. The ripples in our lives that are smooth and symmetrical are a reflection of our success and self-satisfaction, which enhances our potential to exert a positive influence on others. Although we each fulfill various roles in our professional, personal, social, and family lives . . . we are one person; which is the common denominator in our ripple effect analogy . . . each of us is like a stone tossed into a pond . . . which produces the first ripple. We do not know when, where, or how long those ripples will last, but they have the potential to influence many other people as they move outward simultaneously, in all directions.

As I mentioned earlier, we each fulfill different roles in our personal and professional lives; however it is important for us to be the same person in each of those roles. It is unnecessary and unhealthy to create a personal identity that is unique to each role. Some of you may have observed friends or colleagues who strive to maintain identities that are unique to each of their life roles. My advice on this topic is straightforward and simple, be the best person that you can be and be the same person in each of your life roles. It takes enormous personal effort and creates unhealthy personal stress to maintain a professional identity that is different than your personal identity. Living with integrity (which is the most basic foundation of

effective leadership) implies that we are genuine and consistent in our behavior. In doing so, we must avoid projecting a façade that does not reflect the true nature of who we are as a person, regardless of the context.

Let me now return to a comment that I made earlier about the importance of balance in our lives. Several years ago, as a young Assistant Professor, I recall attending a meeting that included a presentation by Carl Clayton who was a professional development and public relations specialist with A. O. Smith Harvestore, Inc. Mr. Clayton's presentation was an eye-opening experience for me as he presented a compelling case for living a balanced life. Carl identified seven key dimensions in life and emphasized the importance of each dimension to our overall success in life, not measured by how much wealth we had accumulated or how hard we worked, but measured by our sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment with our life as a whole.

The seven dimensions were illustrated as spokes on a wheel, labeled as: Physical, Social, Mental, Spiritual, Financial, Career, and Family. The first four dimensions (mental, physical, spiritual, and social) were defined as foundations (essentially cornerstones) for living a full and satisfying life. However, the other three dimensions (career, financial, and family) are where many of us invest much of our time, energy, and resources as we seek climb the ladder of success. In the few minutes remaining, I would like to briefly examine each of these dimensions and then summarize with some thoughts about the importance of seeking balance among them.

Let's start with the Physical dimension. It should be fairly clear to all of us, that maintaining our personal health is an important factor that has a long-lasting and cumulative effect on our personal and professional well-being. Health and wellness have become a high priority in our society as we recognize the relationship between personal health and well-being, both personally and professionally. Having recently undergone surgery for prostate cancer, I can attest to the importance of healthy living by eating right, exercising, and avoiding unhealthy behaviors. Smoking, binge drinking,

and illicit drug use are extreme examples of unhealthy behaviors; but we should also recognize the danger of even moderately unhealthy behaviors over the long term. So my question to you is this: What are you doing on a regular basis to monitor and improve your physical health? Clearly, long term career success is dependent upon good health and each of us is responsible for maintaining our health by living a healthy lifestyle.

The **Social** dimension is also very important based on the fact that as humans, we are all social creatures. We each have the need to interact with others on an informal basis to lead full and satisfying lives. Social interaction often occurs through communication with friends and colleagues, both within and outside the work environment. Socializing is a mechanism that allows people to relax, reenergize, and overcome anxieties commonly associated with our personal and professional roles. Emerging technologies such as cell phones, email, and social media appear to enhance opportunities for socialization, at least virtually; however it is not clear if electronic communication replaces our need for social interaction on a personal level. This perspective was highlighted in the *Megatrends* book authored by John Naisbett who identified *High Tech: High Touch* as one of the ten most important trends in society during the 1990's. Although the explosion of technology is expected to continue, there is a clear need for interpersonal socialization. Are you maintaining contact with a circle of close friends, and/or neighbors that strengthens the social dimension of your life? Without a supporting network of social contacts, we often become too narrowly focused on our careers. Upon retirement, is it reasonable to expect to be able to establish a social network outside the work environment that has not been cultivated in prior years? Human beings are social creatures, and we each need to take time to develop and maintain social contacts beyond our workplace and career contexts.

The third area identified in Clayton's Wheel of Life was labeled the Mental dimension. People benefit from mental stimulation that challenges their ability to think, process information, and make decisions.

Clearly, mental processing follows the saying “use it or lose it” whereby individuals who are not challenged to grow in their personal or professional lives, seem to suffer from a reduced ability to think rationally in a changing world. Mental stimulation can occur in a wide variety of settings from classrooms to research labs to individual conversations; however, it is clear that when individuals avoid challenging their mental capacity, atrophy can result. Have you read a good book or attended a stimulating lecture recently . . . simply for pleasure? Or how about taking time away from your work to clear your mind in order to return with a renewed sense of energy, purpose, and vision? Sometimes, we become victims of our heritage, and the strength of our work ethic causes us to overlook the periodic need to recharge our mental batteries. Some like to jog . . . others play golf . . . what activities do you enjoy that contribute to your mental health?

The fourth dimension identified by Clayton regarding Spirituality often causes people to squirm in their seats. Many people equate spirituality with religion. Although the spiritual dimension encompasses religion, spirituality is a broader concept. The Spiritual dimension assumes the existence of a higher power in the universe, and that each of us has been placed on this earth to serve a purpose. Seeking to define one’s purpose in life and to pursue that calling is prerequisite to achieving self-satisfaction. Failing to define one’s purpose in life can result in feeling empty and unfulfilled, questioning our existence on this earth. Achieving a sense of balance in our spiritual life involves recognizing who we are as a person and why we exist on this earth. For example, I have concluded that my overall purpose in life is simply to help others be successful. Gaining that perspective has been helpful as I fulfill my roles as a husband, father, teacher, and advisor . . . along with many other roles that I have in life. Knowing what I perceive as my purpose . . . helps me to balance the spiritual dimension in my life. Do you have a clear picture of your purpose in life? Think about times when you felt the greatest sense of fulfillment or satisfaction in your life. Those times provide clues regarding your life’s purpose. Once identified, it is stimulating to

think about your roles and responsibilities in the context of serving a higher purpose. Clearly defining a purpose for your life will have a profound effect on how you live and how you interact with those around you.

As I mentioned earlier, the first four dimensions (Physical, Social, Mental, and Spiritual, which equate to body, heart, mind, and soul) are foundational cornerstones that require some degree of balance for us to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction and personal fulfillment in life. Neglecting any one of those dimensions over the long run can have negative implications and potentially jeopardize your potential for success and personal fulfillment. Although balancing the four dimensions will not guarantee self-satisfaction . . . imbalance among those dimensions often results in feeling that life is not all that it could be . . . that something is lacking.

Likewise, overinvesting in one of these dimensions at the expense of another can result in serious consequences. For example, many times our students tend to emphasize the mental and social dimensions of their lives, but neglect the physical and spiritual dimensions. Over time, such an imbalance may result in an assortment of health problems and or soul-searching, leading them to question decisions about their career path. Ultimately, each of us needs some degree of balance among the four foundational dimensions in order to achieve a sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment in our lives.

The last three dimensions that I would like to discuss this morning include career, financial, and family. Career is an easy dimension to address in this context because we often place high emphasis and expend our personal time and energy on advancing our careers, or career preparation in the case of students. For many of us, our personal identity is closely linked to our professional identity. This is especially important when you begin to contemplate retirement at some point in the future, by asking: ‘Who am I?’ after I retire. If I am no longer a professor, a teacher, an advisor, a researcher, etc. then how do I define myself as a person? Again, a healthy balance between our personal and professional lives is necessary for us to achieve satisfaction and fulfillment in life. Are

you keeping your career in proper perspective with regard to the other dimensions? Are other dimensions being sacrificed by an over-emphasis on your career? Often, it is the family and physical dimensions that suffer. Again, balanced living is the key to long-term fulfillment and satisfaction in life.

The **Financial** dimension is another area that is very personal in nature and not openly discussed in professional circles. However, we are each responsible to be stewards of our resources. We are responsible for managing our personal and professional resources, both now and in the future. Specifically, that means that we need to be able to support ourselves, live within our means, manage our spending, save for the future, and plan for long term goals. Social security and pension plans are great programs; however we need to manage our financial resources in order to help us achieve our personal and professional goals. One tip that I learned several years ago was to redirect a portion of my merit raise each year into a personal savings account or IRA, based on the assumption that I wouldn't feel the pain of reducing my income if the funds were diverted before they ever appeared in my pay check. Following this strategy, Pam and I have helped to fund three undergraduate scholarships at Iowa State, Missouri, and Ohio State in our desire to "Pay It Forward" with respect to the educational opportunities and professional support that I received from each of those institutions. Over time, by re-directing a small portion of my salary increase each year to fund those scholarships, we have made a real difference in the lives of undergraduate students at those institutions – literally for eternity -- another good example of the ripple effect created by Paying It Forward! Do you have clear goals for your financial future? Have you developed strategies to achieve those goals? There are many different programs and resources available to help us make good financial decisions . . . however, each of us has the ultimate responsibility to live within our means and plan for our financial future. The key is don't procrastinate – start today!

Family is the seventh dimension that Carl Clayton identified that contributes to a sense of

fulfillment in our lives. Although we each have unique circumstances in our families, the key point is the connection and commitment that we have to our family members. Spouses, children, parents, siblings, and other family members . . . each provide blessings and challenges that influence our sense of satisfaction in life. For some, we have an extensive family and are challenged to maintain meaningful relationships with all of them. For others, we may have smaller families or live some distance away from them. Regardless of the size and scope, the important question is the quality of the relationship that you have with your family. Do you experience a satisfactory and fulfilling relationship with your family? Or do you feel estranged from one or more family members? Once again, this is a difficult topic to address openly; however it is clear that we are not able to compartmentalize our professional lives, separate and distinct from our personal lives. If we have family relationships that create stress in our personal lives, ultimately that stress can carry over into our professional lives, influencing our performance and productivity if left unresolved. Family members serve as a great source of support and encouragement when we face challenges or difficulties in our professional roles. However, there may be times when family situations distract our attention and divert our energy from fulfilling our professional roles. For those times, employee assistance programs can provide a confidential and objective source of support. We need to have the courage and resolve to seek out such assistance when we find ourselves in times of need. Both for our own good, but also for the benefit of those with whom we work on a daily basis.

Carl Clayton used a self-assessment instrument in his presentation several years ago, similar to one that has been distributed to you. During his presentation, Clayton asked us to use a seven-point scale in which 1 was poor and 7 was excellent to rate our sense of satisfaction or fulfillment on each dimension. After completing our individual ratings, we were asked to draw a line connecting the ratings on adjacent spokes. As you study the shape of your results . . . Do you perceive your wheel to be somewhat

balanced and symmetrical? . . . which corresponds with a relatively smooth ride as you travel down the superhighway of your life. On the other hand, if there is severe imbalance among the seven dimensions, you might expect a bumpier ride. Experiencing imbalance among the four foundational dimensions (physical, social, mental, and spiritual, located across the bottom of the wheel) may inhibit our potential satisfaction in the financial, career, and/or family dimensions.

Tradeoffs are also an important factor to consider in balanced living. Some individuals (knowingly or unknowingly) sacrifice certain dimensions of their lives (at least in the short run) to place more emphasis on other dimensions. Graduate students often make sacrifices in the financial and family dimensions of their lives in the short run in order achieve long term career goals. Such tradeoffs are fine, so long as it is a conscious decision, and only for a short period of time. But if you are feeling dissatisfied or unfulfilled for some reason, you might want to examine the seven dimensions to determine if you are experiencing life balance issues that may need to be addressed.

As I mentioned earlier, each of us in our professional roles have unique opportunities to interact with professional colleagues at various levels and contribute to their development and success in various ways. Living a balanced life not only contributes to our own sense of success and fulfillment . . . but also allows each of us to Pay it Forward by influencing others through the ripple effect. Zig Ziglar has been quoted as saying *“You can get what you want, if you help enough other people get what they want!”* I hope that each of you has been challenged to seek and maintain balance among these seven dimensions in your life. I truly believe that doing so will enhance your potential for professional success and personal satisfaction in your life . . . and you in turn may have a similar effect on those around you back at home. If my comments have contributed in some small way to your success, then I will have truly have Paid it Forward and fulfilled my purpose here this morning!

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today. It is truly been an

honor and a blessing to present the 2012 AAAE Distinguished Lecture. Best wishes for a successful conference! [Using American Sign Language, gestured “eye, love, you” to audience.]