

BRIDGE LEADER PROJECT

Interviewee: Phillip L. Clay

Interviewer: Clarence G. Williams

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WILLIAMS: Today is September 18, 2002, and I'm here with Chancellor Phil Clay of MIT. Phil, I'd like to get your impressions about a definition that I'm going to present to you, on a concept that I call "bridge leadership." The term "bridge leader" describes a small core of non-black or non-minority faculty who have been instrumental in bridging cultural, racial, and ethnic divisions, and in transforming places of higher education into more welcoming, nurturing environments for minorities. These are individuals who reach out, who value cultural differences, racial diversity, and affirmation of ethnic identity, who recognize special challenges and dilemmas in generating a diverse workplace and educational setting, and who support minorities as they try to adapt to mainstream white American institutions. Could you reflect on that definition? Is there anything you would add or refine about it?

CLAY: It's a very good definition. I had not thought to put a label on this kind of leadership. There are a couple of other things I would add to it. One is that the starting point for many of the people who exert this kind of leadership is a connection with an individual person. While they certainly have those characteristics you describe as a general way of viewing the world and working in an organization, the leadership often starts with an individual and sometimes is limited to a small number of individuals. The second is that bridge leaders tend to play—and have the ability to play—an effective

institutional role, that is, they have an understanding and an appreciation for the need to prepare the organization to support the kind of leadership and change that they are trying to promote. Sometimes they do it boldly and almost like a bull in a china shop, other times they do it skillfully, quietly, with hardly anybody noticing what they're doing—things sort of change, and nobody really knows quite how it happened.

Another thing that I would note about bridge leaders as a group is that they tend to include those people who are powerful people in institutions and occasionally also people who are on the margins—people who are known to be, for lack of a better word, “troublemakers.” If the “troublemakers” are skillful and respected, they're able to play this role very effectively. But they're not all that way. Some of them are quite mainstream; they are people who, they would say, are “simply doing their job.”

WILLIAMS: That's true. In fact, most of the people whom I consider in that category and whom I've interviewed put it just like you said. They don't see anything out of the ordinary that they're doing, they're just doing their job.

CLAY: I should also add that they tend to be—and there are exceptions—older rather than younger. They tend to be people who have quite a range of influence across a department or a school or throughout the Institute, and they tend to have a bit of courage. They will do it sometimes when others who share their view wouldn't touch it.

WILLIAMS: That's an important word, courage. People who fall in the bridge leader category usually are people with courage. In what way would you say you have been

impacted by the presence or absence of people of that kind in your education and your career?

CLAY: I certainly think I've benefited from bridge leaders who operated on my behalf, but I also suspect there have been some whom I didn't know about. I'm appreciative, because if you look back at our people over time—and if we look around even today—there are bridge non-leaders. I can certainly say there have been some individuals who helped, and I think these—at least in my experience—are people who not only tell you where the doors are, they tell you a little bit about what's behind the doors, how you open the doors, maybe whose door is unlocked, and other things so that you make this step and you feel that it's a real step; you aren't sort of carried over the threshold.

WILLIAMS: Some people put this group in the mentoring category. When you look back, do you recall the kinds of people you encountered on the undergraduate level—or even before, the high-school level—who fell in that category? Do you remember such people, going back in time, and what made it click between the two of you?

CLAY: I may have lived a charmed life, because I can think back a long way to people whom I regard as special and who were especially encouraging. Maybe it's a case where I was a kid who was inclined to take suggestions. Some of us didn't take suggestions, and I think I was the kind of kid who if someone suggested I could do A, B, or C, I would go home and think about it—"Now, do I want to do A, B, or C?" I didn't ignore the advice.

If we skip elementary school—I thought of my first-grade teacher as an assistant mother—and go on, I think there have been people at different points who encouraged me to do things which at the time I didn't see a particular value to or I didn't take the initiative on, but they pushed and I went along with it. Just to give you some illustration, I was relatively shy and I had an adviser and a teacher in high school who kept pushing me not to be shy. It was almost like they were trying to correct a behavior which they thought in the long run wouldn't do me any good. They kept volunteering me for things and saying, "You're the one who should do this," and so forth. While it didn't correct the shy feeling, it certainly meant that I can not act as shy as I really feel. I think that has been a valuable step.

When I was in college, "honors" was not something you got by having a certain grade-point average. There was a threshold on that, but you got honors by being in the honors program and not everybody was asked to be in the honors program. You were asked if there was a perception that you could really do an interesting piece of work in the particular way that the department organized its honors program. And I was tapped on the shoulder to do that. They didn't have to tap me on the shoulder. I wouldn't have accused them of racism if they hadn't tapped me on the shoulder, but they did and that was a very good experience. I think it was a genuine reach, and I think any of those professors would argue that they were just doing their job.

I think a similar thing has happened at MIT in my career and all the organizational and professional settings I've been in. I think one will ask, "Why did they ask you and not the guy sitting next to you?" I don't know the answer to that, but I appreciate being asked or having the suggestion made or having the extra bit of encouragement.

WILLIAMS: Let me turn it around a little differently. Let's take college, for example. Do you recall having a very, very special kind of relationship with any particular faculty members, and what do you think created that kind of relationship?

CLAY: I had a number of professors who were special, but I wouldn't call them mentors. I would say they sort of put things in my way and encouraged me to take them. I wouldn't say that there were too many who were personal mentors. They were more faculty advisers in the strongest and most positive sense of the word.

I gave the example of the honors program, but even before that there was my freshman adviser. The particular way the university advised freshmen and sophomores was that they took faculty—and I assume these were faculty who wanted to be advisers, or whose arms were effectively twisted into being advisers—and basically put them on a separate floor in a separate building. The advisers didn't have a telephone in the office—they just had a chair, a table, and a desk—and you were told to go in and see your adviser every so often, and sometimes your adviser would send for you.

I said, "Okay, I'll go every so often," and I had a wonderful guy who turned out to be in my department, which I think was by accident. He just expressed a genuine interest, offered me options, and said, "Have you thought of this and have you thought of that?" He didn't push anything on me. He wasn't there to guide my career, he was just there to make sure that my freshman year was complete.

WILLIAMS: You have to put that in perspective, too. At the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, at the time you were there, there weren't a lot of black folks there, certainly not a lot of undergraduate black students.

CLAY: The blacks in my class could be counted on one hand—well, two hands, because there were nine of us.

WILLIAMS: Nine out of a class of?

CLAY: Twenty-five hundred.

WILLIAMS: So there were virtually none of you there.

CLAY: Well, we could fill up a table.

WILLIAMS: Your experience with the adviser, then, was a very important piece given the period in which you were going through that university.

Let me ask you about MIT. How does bridge leadership, you think, get carried out in practice at a place like MIT? When you reflect on your relationship with one or more of our bridge leaders here—and you do know a number I've put in that category; in fact, pretty much all of them—and how the relationships came about, evolved, and influenced your perspective, how would you think about that?

CLAY: It's hard to know fully how it happened. I know in the current year, and in recent years when I've had to identify people, I'll go and ask people about who they know who have the characteristics to do this or that. I'll approach the person, then, not because I know them, but because they were spoken highly of by people whom I did know. I assume some of that happened with me, so at least from my point of view, the way I came in contact with most of those people is that I wound up in the same room with them around the table. And I wasn't always sure how I got there. In some cases, I wasn't sure how they got there either. Some people did because of their role, but others, who knows? You wind up in a room and you're the committee or task force to do X, and after a while, I stopped asking why. I think what happened is that it's a small place and people are curious.

I think at MIT there is a disposition to not make the easy assumption that you know everybody. But when you're looking for somebody to do something, or if you want to know somebody who understands something or who could contribute or who knows how to do something, you tend to ask. One of the ways bridge leaders have been effective is to sort of put themselves in that network, so they can hear of opportunities and then pass those along or push you along toward the opportunities—"Here's something you can apply for." They don't necessarily do the thing to make you get it, but they probably go out of their way to make sure you're not precluded from it. Occasionally, I'm sure they probably also use leverage where it's appropriate.

WILLIAMS: I've heard that before, about the way bridge leaders help others.

I'm intrigued by a question that was raised to you at the reception held over in the Faculty Club shortly after you were appointed chancellor.

CLAY: Last September?

WILLIAMS: Last September, right. A student asked you a question and I'm sure you remember that question. I think you told the student, "You come by the office and see me sometime, and we'll talk about it." The student asked you, essentially, "What advice would you give on how I can get where you are?" He may have said it differently, but basically he was asking for advice about how one gets to be in such a high-level position. What could you say about that?

CLAY: I think I probably did say that it would be best for me to talk to this student face-to-face.

WILLIAMS: Yes, you did say that.

CLAY: Some of the things that I would suggest would probably be hard to communicate in a short period of time in that kind of space. I worry a little bit about somebody sort of taking my shorthand for something and misinterpreting it.

I guess if I were to think about it for a moment, I'd suggest several things. One is, there are an awful lot of people around—the university is one place, but it could be any other place, a corporation or an agency—who really do view part of their responsibility as helping the next generation along. They love to explain how the world works. Sometimes they'll tell you even if you don't ask. I think it's important for young people to listen closely, because what they hear when they ask such a question—or what these



uninvited mentors offer—is nowhere written down. The only way you get it is if you ask and are told; somebody tells you whether you ask them or not, but you listen all the same; or you do social science and try to reconstruct by talking to people and reading books about how things happen in organizations.

So my first piece of advice would be for young people to just go out and be as curious as possible about how life works in a person's adult development, career development, and personal development—those three things—and try to integrate that information in a way that represents suggestions and lessons for them. I think many young people don't have a very realistic notion of how things work, and there's no reason they should unless they've done this over a period or they come from an especially chatty family where they've heard this kind of talk for years and years and they've just integrated it. Listening is the best thing—listening for the personal, the social, the organizational, all of those things integrated together.

We have an awful lot of smart people, but they don't have any way of knowing how their intelligence could be used, or they don't pay much attention to social developments, so they find themselves being awkward and they don't know that that awkwardness keeps them out of certain settings, or they can just be neutralized or ignored. You can't suddenly be sophisticated, but you can at least listen. You can learn a lot listening, and asking questions. You can find settings to use your knowledge.

Young people sometimes miss the opportunity. A young person can ask a question, which, if you're forty and ask that question, you would be judged stupid or insensitive or whatever. If you're eighteen you can ask the question and people will say, "That's a good question—I'm glad you asked it, I have lots to tell you."

One of the things I do with freshmen is make that same invitation that I made at that session last week. I even tried to jack it up a bit and suggested to a freshman group a couple of years ago—“You’re in the right class to take my job, so if you just come up and ask me how I got it and tell me you’re going to get it, I’d be delighted to tell you how to take my job. Just don’t take it too early! I need it a few more years to get set. But by the time you’re ready, I’ll be ready to give it to you.”

WILLIAMS: I’d like to talk a little about your impressions of MIT with regard to race relations, cultural diversity, and ethnic difference. What’s your assessment of our minority presence at all levels?

CLAY: I think we’ve come a long way. I do recall that when I came the numbers were tiny. In all respects, we’ve made some progress. We’ve made a lot more progress in undergraduate enrollment than we’ve made in any other area—in graduate enrollment where we’ve made some progress, or faculty where we’ve made some progress. We have a continuing challenge because it’s a very distributed process.

In undergraduate enrollment, there is a staff of people who go out and do the push for applications. We apply fairness and we can have a class that reflects, I think, diversity of talent in the country. It’s more complicated in other areas, so we don’t have the same kind of uniform or consistent application of that ethic or that process. We have uneven results there, and that has been a source of continuing challenge—that’s pretty clear for MIT and for other institutions.

That’s the mixed news. I think the good news is that MIT is the kind of institution where there is an openness to fairness. It’s not about blue blood, it’s about

brains; it's not about tradition, it's about capability. So I think there is every reason to believe that when we go out and find good people we can, in fact, have some progress in getting minorities hired. Boston, for a long time, was a drag on that because the reputation of the city was a problem. I think that is not as serious a problem now, but it was for some time.

### Video portion

WILLIAMS: Today is September 18, 2002, and I'm here with Chancellor Phil Clay of MIT. Phil, one of the things I wanted to ask is to get your impressions of this term that I call "bridge leader." I describe the bridge leader as part of a small core of non-black or non-minority faculty who have been instrumental in bridging cultural, racial, and ethnic divisions, and in transforming places of higher education into more welcoming, nurturing environments for minorities. These are people who reach out, who value cultural differences and racial diversity, who recognize special challenges and dilemmas in generating a diverse workplace and educational setting, and who support minorities as they try to adapt to mainstream white American institutions. Could you reflect on this definition? Is there anything you would add or refine about it?

CLAY: I think it's a very good definition. It captures some of the complexities of this style of leadership that focuses on the professional as well as the organizational and social. I would add a couple of things. One is that these individuals are often people who work at a very personal level. They try to identify individuals and try to assess their strengths and their potential, and they then make the connection to opportunities in the

organization—sometimes doing it quietly, almost invisibly; other times doing it almost like a bull in a china shop. Either way it shows a bit of courage that sometimes the organization appreciates and sometimes it doesn't, but they can be very effective in bringing about change.

The other thing I'll say about this role is that they pay a lot of attention to empowering the person they're leading. It's not as though they're trying to carry somebody over a threshold; it's more that they're trying to help people who are new to a setting, new to an institution, identify the different avenues and paths to opportunity, to understand the institutional culture associated with getting access to it, and then making sure that there is consistent encouragement. That's a great gift to anybody in an organization. It's also important for an organization.

We're talking about bridge leadership in the context of promoting diversity, and every organization—a business or educational institution—needs to have a way of making sure it can generate new leadership with the right people in the right positions, and that the organizational culture is transparent. Bridge leadership is critical to an organization because it's the way an organization makes its institutional culture transparent, so that the right people can be in positions to lead the organization forward and to integrate successfully. The bridge leader is obviously critical in the racial dimension because, in the absence of that kind of leadership, black students or faculty or staff wouldn't quite understand how to access opportunities in the organization, and will either not fully develop their talents or will eventually discover that maybe they aren't welcome or their talents could be best used somewhere else. That would be an institutional loss.

WILLIAMS: What you're really stressing is that these kinds of individuals make the environment much more positive for people who are different, to begin to show their talent by first being at ease and that it's okay to be here.

CLAY: That's right, and the university is unique in the sense that it not only attracts talent among students who will come to gain education, but also faculty. The institution, if it's to be great, really has to focus on talent and developing the talent of its bright young students and faculty.

WILLIAMS: One of the things that is very positive here at MIT, and it's so important that we take advantage of it, is that it has such diversity from all over the world and from within the United States. People are very shocked about the diversity that we have, particularly among our student body, and it really is a positive wealth.

CLAY: I think it is. We've made a great deal of progress in undergraduate student diversification, and it's been stable for a few years. We have a somewhat less even development of that diversity in the graduate student population—some areas are more advanced in that regard than others. And faculty diversification is a challenge. In the latter case, this is obviously locally distributed as opposed to undergraduate admissions, where we can set an institutional goal and apply fully the resources to compose a class that is diverse.

WILLIAMS: At a university like MIT, there are certain very specific things that we have control of and that we can really do, such as increasing diversity on the undergraduate

level. But when it comes down to the area of the faculty, that's quite different, wouldn't you say?

CLAY: It is very different. With undergraduates, we are basically going out into a fresh talent pool in the eleventh grade and asking, "Who are the most promising young people out there?" We present our case, we get the applications in, and we can sit down and propose a class. With faculty, you have vacancies that have a particular character and a job description. You're trying to find a match between the characteristics of the best possible people for that position and the pool of people who are available at that point in time. Of course, we do try to go to other institutions and take their people, so it's not exactly working only with new talent. But we do have a much more limited arena to operate in.

I'm old enough to remember when we talked as institutions about growing our own and about, "Well, gee, it's difficult to fill these positions now, but if we have graduate students whom we develop into prospective faculty members, then we can grow our own and share." But American higher education did not do that. We have not greatly increased the production of minority PhD students. It has grown, but we have also lost many of those to industry because we've become not as attractive as academic careers once were for this population. So higher education has some work to do in diversifying the academy.

WILLIAMS: In what ways have you been impacted by the presence or absence of bridge leaders in your education and career? Obviously, some very positive things happened, because there's no way you could be the chancellor of MIT otherwise.

CLAY: I've had a charmed life in that regard. I could go all the way back to elementary school teachers and neighbors and my experience in the barber shop, even, but I won't go back that far. If there's been anything, it's been that there have been always different people at different times and in different settings—but always some individuals who went out of their way to offer me advice. If there's anything I can brag about, it is that I took some good advice. I certainly am aware that not everybody has that advantage, but I have had it and it has benefited me greatly—not just in my experience here at MIT over the years as a graduate student and a faculty member, but going back many years.

If there's anything that I think I did to make that process happen, of taking advantage of the advice, it was to listen. You can't do everything people suggest you do, but there's an awful lot of good will out there which people will sometimes give you even if your advancement is not the main thing they're trying to do. There is a tendency for the old to share with the young.

WILLIAMS: When you look at some of the bridge leaders you came across, particularly faculty types, what are some of their characteristics that you saw through observation and experience?

CLAY: To some extent, it's hard to characterize this population because it includes people who themselves benefited from bridge leadership in a previous generation with a different ethnic group. It also includes people who have had a life of privilege. They were born into privilege. So it's a great range of people on that dimension.

Other characteristics are, one, there tends to be a genuine interest and curiosity in people. Bridge leaders present themselves as open to all people. You don't feel self-conscious or uncomfortable in their presence, generally. They are able to convey a curiosity which is not nosiness and they are able to frame their contributions in less threatening ways—"Have you thought of ...?" or "This is another way of doing it ..."

They are generally pretty open about their observations of your strengths. They are able also to identify things that you could change to strengthen your position. Occasionally, they are skillful enough to be sharply critical in a way that makes this pain not hurt very much. You sort of have the feeling that they have a genuine interest in your welfare, so you are willing to take risks and they are willing to stick with you even when you make mistakes or fall short. They see something that they are trying to nurture and they're not going to allow a temporary setback to hold you back. They are generally positive people who will concede negative things about the institution or about their own department and profession, but they are willing to go and ask you to go beyond what they see as negative with the promise that it can be different. They are good at vision.

WILLIAMS: I like the idea you mention that in general they are good people, just genuinely good people.

CLAY: You make judgments about people. There are smart people, there are good people, there are wise people, and then there are people who have opposite characteristics, who make a suggestion and you wonder, "Well, why did they make that suggestion?" I don't want to suggest that bridge leaders are all perfect and lack individual agendas, but they're often pretty honest about it. They will say, "Achieving



success with you will make me feel good, because I haven't been able to do it before.”

That's a pretty honest statement. They're somehow betting on you in much the same way we would bet on a horse. But for a faculty member that's not a bad way, to say, “I see something in you as a student and I'm going to push, because I think we can make it.” And they do mean “we.”

WILLIAMS: What would you consider “best practices” in bridge leadership—specific programs or results that you been a part of or observed over the years that have made the environment more positive for people of different backgrounds?

CLAY: This is tough. I can't think of a practice—that is, a set of activities—that I would say is ideal. Keep in mind my early observation was that these bridge leaders are individuals. They are individuals sometimes who are self-empowered, that is, nobody asked them to do this job. Nobody rewards them for doing the job, necessarily. In fact, they sometimes do it at some risk or some cost. They are also people who probably resist the label that would be associated with a program.

So it's hard for me to say what represents “practice.” But if there's anything that supports the emergence of this kind of leadership, it is that there is an institutional leader—a president or a dean or a department head—who sends the signal that they respect this kind of outreach, that they respect this kind of support, that they expect senior people to help junior people and faculty to guide and develop students. They expect that without saying exactly how it's to be done or who is responsible for whom.

I think that's a key ingredient. Then there's a program or a label or some process that helps, but I don't think there is any particular one that I could say is magical.

WILLIAMS: Thanks you very much for your time. This has been very helpful.

CLAY: Thank you.