

## **Not Your Everyday Leader**

Speech for Hancock Young Professionals

April 9, 2025

Good afternoon, everyone! Thank you for having me here with you all today. I am honored to speak to this incredible group of young professionals who have chosen HYP to step into the world with ambition, energy, and a drive to make your mark. You are not just the future; you all are the now. And today, I want to talk about what it means to be a leader—not the kind from dusty textbooks or stiff boardrooms, but a leader who is real, who is human, and who is ready for today's world. After 35 years of working for your local electric cooperative, keeping the lights on and the people connected, here is what I would like to share. I call it: Not Your Everyday Leader.

Leadership is not about a title or a corner office. It is about how you show up every day—for your work, your team, your community, and yourself. So, let us break it down.

Authenticity: be you—unapologetically. The world does not need more polished clones reciting the right lines. It needs people who are real about who they are, what they value, and what they are still figuring out. Authenticity builds trust. When you are genuine with your team and your community, they will meet you there. Do not fake it ‘til you make it—be it until you grow it.

But being yourself does not mean standing still. That is where “sharpening the saw” comes in. Think of yourself as a tool—you must keep your edge. Learn new skills, dive into tough books, chase experiences that push you. If you are not growing, you are dulling. Leadership demands you stay sharp, not just for yourself, but for the people and the community counting on you.

And growth is not solo—it ties into community. For 35 years, I have seen what happens when we put people first. At the co-op, we do not just power homes; we power lives. Leadership is not about climbing alone—it is about lifting others. Mentor someone. Share what you know. Build something bigger than yourself. Our co-op thrives because we are member-owned and community-driven. You have that power too—so, invest in your people and watch the ripple effect.

You are not leading in a vacuum; you are part of something bigger. Build connections, lift others up, give back. A great leader does not just climb the ladder—they help others climb too. Your community—whether it's your team, your industry, or the people around you—thrives when you invest in it. Share knowledge, open doors, create space for others. That is how you leave a **legacy**.

360 peer review (handout): leadership is a conversation, not a monologue. Ask for feedback from everyone: your peers, your mentors, the people you lead, even your community. It's not always fun hearing how you're seen, but it's gold. A 360 review gives you the full view—not just your boss's take, but what your team feels, what your colleagues notice. Use it to grow, not to defend yourself. It is how you keep that saw sharp.

Empathy: this is your superpower. In a world buzzing with AI, deadlines, and chaos, empathy keeps us human. It is not about being soft—it's about understanding what drives people. When someone is struggling, don't just see the problem—see the person. Ask. Listen. Care. Empathy does not lower standards; it raises people up to meet them. A leader who gets this builds loyalty that echoes through their team and their community.

Diplomacy: conflict is coming—maybe a project dispute or a bruised ego. Diplomacy is how you navigate it without torching relationships. It is not dodging tough talks; it's having them with respect and clarity. Say what is needed, but keep the path open for solutions. You do not have to win every battle—you just have to keep the team and the community moving forward.

And don't forget doing the work. Leadership isn't all vision boards and TED Talks. Sometimes it's sleeves up, grinding it out with your team. Don't just delegate and vanish—be in it. When they see you hustle, they will trust you to lead. Being part of the team and the community doesn't shrink your authority; it builds it.

But here's the catch: don't get complacent. Success can make you comfortable, and comfort can make you stagnant. Just because you are doing well doesn't mean you stop pushing. Challenge yourself.

Question your habits. The second you think you've "made it," you've

stopped growing. Stay hungry—not for praise, but for impact—on your team, your community, and beyond.

All of this—authenticity, sharpening the saw, community, empathy, diplomacy, hard work—it is a lot. That is why taking care of yourself is non-negotiable. You cannot lead if you are burned out. Burnout’s not a medal; it is a warning. Sleep. Move. Eat something real. Check in with yourself. If you are not at your best, you are not giving your team, your community, or your family your best.

And part of self-care is knowing when to say no. You do not have to say yes to every ask, every project, every “quick favor.” Every opportunity isn’t your opportunity. Saying no isn’t weakness—it’s focus. When you say no to distractions, you say yes to what matters—your growth, your family, our team, your community.

So, here’s my challenge. Be a leader who is not afraid to be human. Sharpen your saw and seek feedback. Lead with empathy and

navigate with diplomacy. Do the work with your team, build your community, and never settle for complacency. Take care of yourself—because you are in this for the long haul.

You are not here to be an everyday leader. You are here to **redefine** leadership—one authentic, sharp, community-driven step at a time.

Of all the things I do at Coast Electric, two tasks make my heart so incredibly happy. They make coming to work not feel like work. One is managing our Operation Round Up program where I oversee our Coast Electric Community Trust committee who has put over \$2.1 million of our members' generous contributions back into our community in the form of grants funding non-profit organizations' programs that better the quality of life in the communities we serve and provide energy assistance to our members in need. With over \$1.6 million in grants funding 170 agencies and over \$600,000 in

energy assistance, making Coast Electric members one of the largest philanthropic organizations on the MS Gulf Coast (handout).

The second is chairing a leadership program right here in Hancock County. I was speaking of redefining leadership, so let me tell you about an incredible program of the Hancock chamber; something that has been a cornerstone of my life for the past 15 years:

Leadership Hancock County. If you are looking for a way to do all the things I mentioned - grow, connect, and make a real difference - I hope you'll listen closely, because this program isn't just an opportunity—it's a game-changer. And I can tell you from personal experience, it is also a source of incredible joy.

Let me take you back to when I first stepped into leading this program. Fifteen years ago, I wasn't sure what to expect. I knew I wanted to help people unlock their potential and build a stronger Hancock County, but I had no idea how much this journey would



shape me, too. What I found was a community of driven, curious, and passionate individuals—like you—who were ready to step up, learn, and lead. And over the years, I have watched that community grow into something truly special.

Leadership Hancock County isn't just a program—it's a launchpad. It is where you will sharpen your skills, from collaboration to problem-solving, while tackling real challenges facing our community. You will meet people from all walks of life—business owners, educators, nonprofit leaders—and together, you'll discover how your unique strengths can move the needle. For young professionals like you, it is a chance to build a network that lasts a lifetime and to leave your mark on a place we all call home.

But let me tell you what keeps me coming back, year after year: the joy. There is nothing like seeing someone walk into the program a little unsure, maybe even hesitant, and then watching them light up as they realize what they are capable of. I have seen shy voices turn into confident leaders. I have watched ideas scribbled on napkins

become projects that transform our county. And every time someone says, “This changed my life,” I feel this deep, personal reward that is hard to put into words. It is the kind of fulfillment that doesn’t fade—it grows.

Leading this program for 15 years has taught me that leadership is not about having all the answers. It is about showing up, listening, and empowering others to shine. And trust me, there is no shortage of shining moments. Whether it is laughing over a team-building exercise that goes hilariously off-script or celebrating a breakthrough that solves a community problem, those moments stick with you. They remind you why you do this work—and why it matters.

So, to every young professional in this room: I invite you to join us.

Leadership Hancock County is not just about building your resume—though it will. It is not just about networking—though you’ll meet incredible people. It is about discovering who you are as a leader and finding the joy that comes with making a difference. I can

promise you this: if you take that step, you will get back so much more than you give.

For me, these 15 years have been a gift—a front-row seat to growth, connection, and impact. I would love for you to experience that, too.

Thank you for having me here today. Thank you for your desire and drive to make your mark in Hancock County. Hancock Young Professionals is a powerful group. I look forward to building the future of Hancock County together.

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