

# IN CONVERSATION

WITH...

## Dr. Tom Traves

President  
Dalhousie University  
Halifax

*When Tom Traves became Dalhousie University's 10<sup>th</sup> President in 1995, morale was low. Years of budget cuts and strained labour relations had taken their toll. Seizing the challenge, the former York University professor and Vice President (Academic) at the University of New Brunswick led the venerated institution to a renaissance. Enrollments increased by more than 40 per cent and external research grants and contract income surged 300 per cent. Ever optimistic about Dalhousie's future, Traves shares his perspectives on what we expect from our leaders, and why he tells people he's from Halifax despite his Winnipeg roots.*



**When I came to Dalhousie**, it felt clinically depressed. Today, I see considerable confidence throughout our institution about the future. I think my contribution was to create a vision and say 'This is possible, we can turn this around.' I'm incredibly proud that we made that move from pessimism to optimism.

**I've always been fascinated** by the way that people use titles when they talk to, say, a politician. When people first addressed me as 'Mr. President', I'd look over my shoulder and say, 'Is Bill Clinton in the room?'

**You can learn a lot by** watching other successful people. Workshops, seminars and literature on best practices for management all have merit, but I think learning is experiential. It often happens just by observing other people, and not necessarily your peers or those who do the same work as you.

**There comes a point when** you feel stale in a job. That happened to me. I thought of retiring, moving somewhere else or doing something completely different. Then, over a 24-month period, we had to hire five new vice presidents. Effectively we created an entirely new leadership team with fresh ideas, energy and perspectives. That refreshed me. So much so that I often joke that it was like getting a new job.

**There is a moral authority** that comes with being the president of a university. You have to use it carefully and protect it from being tarnished or squandered. As long as you use this authority appropriately, you have the edge.

**Sometimes when you're feeling tension**, the best thing to do is to keep your mouth shut and start moving your legs. I'm not saying walk away from a situation, but walk around until you feel calm. Then, you can come back and deal with whatever you have to deal with.

**When dealing with a problem**, you have to consider the breadth of the past – the factors that contributed to the situation. What was happening in the economy, the country, politics, and technology? Ask yourself those questions and you have the beginnings of an answer to the issue at hand.

**Leadership is a decathlon.** To be a great leader, you need a breadth of skills, but you don't necessarily have to be the best at everything. In fact, at the Olympics you can win the decathlon and never come in first.

**People have great expectations** of leaders. They value consultation and consideration, but they also have a deep yearning for authority and leadership. The trick is to strike the right balance. Without it, you get into trouble and people won't want to follow you.

**I don't think anyone sets out** to be a mentor. That's a little pompous. Just go about your business. Do it joyfully, mindfully and, hopefully, effectively. If that rubs off on other people, if you have an impact just by doing what you do, that's a very positive side benefit.

**You have to have a** synthetic intelligence to be a good leader. You have to have the capacity to pull information together from different sources in a dynamic way to understand how the whole system works. For a leader, the solution to any situation is not so much in being innovative, but in pulling together the thoughts of other smart people.

**If I've learned anything** that I can pass on to the next generation of leaders, it's this: sift out the trends from the real opportunities for change. Surround yourself with people who dream big. They make an organization great.

**Perhaps the most important advice** I can give is to know yourself and your weaknesses, and point them out to your colleagues. I tell everyone I hire, 'Your first obligation in doing your job is to tell me when I'm full of @#\$.!' 🍷

Interviewed by Anna Stuart, partner, Robertson Surrette – Atlantic Canada's leading recruitment and human resource consulting firm. Leader's Insight conversations are published in each issue of *Atlantic Business Magazine*. Feedback: [dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com](mailto:dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com)