

Commentary

Smarter government: illuminating Illinois through literature

EDITOR’S NOTE: This op-ed was distributed by Capitol News Illinois on behalf of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own.

By JOHN T. SHAW

Several years ago, the staff of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute was preparing for our Renewing Illinois Summit for university and college students, and we wanted to provide them with suggested reading about Illinois. I checked my shelves at the institute and jotted down the titles of various books on state history and politics. I then called several colleagues and asked them if they had any recommendations, phrasing my request this way: “If you were teaching an Illinois 101 course to highly motivated undergraduates, what five books would you assign them to read? They can be histories, biographies, novels or essays. In sum, they would provide a wide-ranging and nuanced understanding of Illinois.” I decided to extend this question to some respected leaders and analysts in Illinois, including U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin, former Gov. Jim Edgar, Illinois House Speaker Chris Welch, former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and former Lt. Gov. Sheila Simon. They



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submitted recommendations that are both inspiring and humbling – inspiring in the sense that the many compelling books underscore the richness and diversity of our state and humbling in that they remind me about how many important books I still should read! The recommendations included biographies of Illinois political leaders such as Paul Douglas, Everett Dirksen, Richard Ogilvie, Carol Moseley Braun, Robert Michel and Adlai Stevenson. They also revealed a deep fascination with Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley and one of his successors, Harold Washington. Respondents touted two general state histories: “Illinois: A History of the Land and Its People” by Roger Biles and “Illinois: A History of the Prairie State” by Robert Howard. Two chronicles of Chicago were frequently recommended: “Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West” by William Cronon and “City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America” by Donald Miller. There was also clear interest in regional histories about Central and

Southern Illinois and about two fabled communities, Cahokia and Kaskaskia. Respondents lauded works by revered Illinois literary luminaries Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks and Theodore Dreiser as well as Illinois’ celebrated writer-presidents, Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama. As the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, I was gratified to see several of Paul Simon’s books recommended: “Lincoln’s Preparation for Greatness,” “Our Culture of Pandering” and “Freedom’s Champion: Elijah Lovejoy.” The institute assembled the recommendations into a booklet called “Illinois 101,” which we sent to libraries, civic groups and public officials across the state. If you would like a copy, email us at paulsimoninstitute@siu.edu and we’ll be glad to mail you one. Inspired by this interest in Illinois literature, the institute launched an Illinois Authors program in which we host conversations with writers about the state. So far, we have had conversations with Robert Hartley, a journalist and historian, about his biographies of Paul Simon and Paul Powell; Kristin Hoganson, a history professor at the University of Illinois, about her book “The Heartland: An American History;” and Margo Jefferson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning arts critic,

about her book “Negroland: A Memoir.” Our conversations with these impressive authors have been wide-ranging and stimulating. They have been on Zoom, but after COVID-19 eases we are eager to host Illinois Author discussions in person throughout the state. We invite everyone to send us the titles of their favorite books about Illinois and recommend authors that we should consider inviting for future discussions. Email your suggestions to paulsimoninstitute@siu.edu. I hope you will join me this year in reading fascinating and valuable books about our state. You might even consider creating an Illinois book club or focusing your current book club’s reading on Illinois-related titles. Such reading adds nuance, color and perspective to our vision of Illinois and fosters a greater appreciation for the legacy of those who came before us. I hope this reading and the discussion it inspires will guide all of us to do more to renew and revitalize the Prairie State.

John T. Shaw is the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University. Shaw’s monthly column explores how Illinois can work toward better politics and smarter government.

Surviving the Great Resignation: Becoming a leader worth working for

By CHRISTAN HISCOCK

If you’re the kind of person who wants a quick hit of info so you can quickly move on, then the bottom line here is that in order to survive the Great Resignation, you have to become a leader worthy of admiration and also get very good at helping your team members define and use their strengths and talents. And if you’re the kind of person who’d like to figure out how to do that, keep reading.

Adapt when it makes sense. The first step is to realize every person on your team has different needs and talents and they all have different ways of finding meaning in their work. The more ways you can find to adapt to be inclusive and address their needs, when it’s appropriate, the more likely it will be for them to want to stay. This could mean delivering information and training in a variety of ways, like written content, as well as live broadcasts, video or audio options, so people can consume it in different ways, or it can mean adjusting work situations and roles, when it becomes necessary and can be done. Recently, I had two of my team members come to me because they weren’t feeling fulfilled any longer in their positions. Neither wanted to leave the company and both wanted to see if there might be other possibilities we could explore. For one of them, we were able to adjust the position to make it a better fit and more meaningful for her. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to do that for the other, and we had to part ways. He had a much higher level of expertise than his position required, and to make a new position for him meant redefining the vision for the company, which couldn’t happen. Happily, he was able to find a position that was perfect for him outside of our company and he has moved on to a new challenge that suits his talents much better. We wholeheartedly believe in fulfillment at Kardia. Fulfillment means utilizing people’s skills, developing their strengths, challenging them to grow,



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helping them find meaning in what they do, and showing them how the experience they’re creating for our clients and in our community matters. While you won’t be able to make everyone happy all the time, the more often they see your effort to work with them, the more they will appreciate it and admire it. **You don’t know it all.** When you have a massive vision and you want to make a great impact in the world, there’s absolutely no way you can do it on your own or know everything that you need to know to reach your end goal. Embrace the fact that you don’t know it all, because the next steps you take after that will put you on the right track a lot faster. The greatest leaders in the world know exactly where they shine, and they double down there, with their time, effort and education. They streamline their focus to become world class in their particular area of genius and then they find the right people to do everything else. From there, it’s a matter of helping them feel fulfilled in their role and challenging them to bring their best. This is why your own personal growth is so important. Only the transformed can transform. In other words, if you haven’t figured out what is meaningful for you and what makes you fulfilled in your role as a leader, you won’t be able to show them how to do it either. Learning new things, becoming curious, and expanding your knowledge base are key to growth and innovation, for yourself, your team and your company. That’s why it’s good business practice to take an in-depth look at your company on a regular basis and figure out what needs to be improved. Then get your team to help you solve the prob-

lem, because they have great insight to share, and you don’t know it all. For my executive team, we do that once every quarter. Not only does that keep our company from becoming stagnant, but also it helps them see we can make effective changes when we work together, that as a company we are willing to make those changes, and most importantly, that their opinions and ideas matter. **Give your team appreciation and respect.** There’s very little in business that upsets me, but seeing people treated like “workers” and not as valuable human beings is one thing that does. Every single person on the planet has value. They matter. They all have something to add, and they all have areas of genius. All that’s really needed is to cultivate their genius, so they can use their talents in the best possible way and to their fullest extent. Your job as a leader is to make sure that cultivation is part of your daily practice. That means getting to know your team members, learning what they do well and finding out where they want to grow, then doing your best to make that happen. Your team won’t thrive if the only feedback or interaction they ever get from you is what’s going wrong. That’s going to have them looking for a job elsewhere in a hurry. Your people have invested in you and your vision by agreeing to work for you. That alone is worthy of praise, and at the very least, it’s certainly worth the investment of your personal time to say thank you. **Communicate your vision.** If your team members don’t understand your bigger vision and how their position fits into it, they’ll have no idea whether they’re making a difference and moving the company toward that goal. We all want to know that our efforts matter. To help your people see that, you have to know, very clearly, where you’re going as a company, what your immediate goals and objectives are, and then you must be able to communicate them,

so that everyone on your team understands their part in making it happen. On top of that, you also have to express why what you do matters for your clients, the company and for your team, so everyone knows the reasons for what you do and how it makes life better. We feel so much better about ourselves when we know we are contributing on a bigger level and that we are a part of something greater. **Hold the highest degree of integrity.** As a leader, all eyes are on you. Whether you realize it or not, your people are watching and evaluating everything you say and do. If you’re saying one thing but doing another, that’s going to erode trust in a hurry. Instead, you want to be the person they admire and are proud to say they work for. That means doing the right thing because it’s the right thing – even when things aren’t going well. The true indicator of a brand’s strength, both personal and professional, is what happens when the brand is under stress. It’s easy to do the right thing when things are going well, but it’s a true testament of character when you do the right thing when it’s the hardest decision you have to make. When you act with the highest degree of integrity, people appreciate it, respect it and admire it. **Becoming a worthy leader** Just like your company, you must grow with the times, changes, and challenges you face. Your ability to adapt to whatever comes your way all hinges on your ability to admit when you don’t have the answer, find the people who do, and then empower them to take their knowledge and put it to work for you. Respect them for it. Show them your appreciation, often.

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