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## Discursive Leadership in Higher Education: The Case of Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter at Ole Miss

Milorad M. Novicevic  
*University of Mississippi*

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**Milorad M. Novicevic**  
*The University of Mississippi*

**Abstract**

In this essay I explain the concept of discursive leadership and describe how it is mapped on the leadership practice of Dr. Jeffrey Vitter, Ole Miss Chancellor. I provide multiple examples illustrating instances of this mapping and outline the vocabulary of key terms that my MBA students derived from Chancellor Vitter's letters, speeches, statements, and social media presence. My essay provides a unique contribution to our understanding of discursive leadership practice in the context of higher education.

When in early 2016 I opened my Ole Miss Email Inbox, upon checking an email containing Chancellor Vitter's first letter I expected to read a routine transmission of information about ongoing activities at the University of Mississippi. I was surprised, however, when I discovered that the letter was written in a warm, personalized tone with the intent to initiate a meaningful discourse on a variety of critical - even polarizing - events occurring in the Institution's environment. Soon, the Chancellor's initial discourse evolved into a multitude of statements, tweets, and social media posts creating my eerie feeling that former Duke University President Terry Sanford, an icon of presidential communication in higher education, was reincarnated in today's electronic world.

Chancellor Vitter's communicative leadership resonates well with Fairhurst's (2007) concept of discursive leadership, the process of providing meaning(s) to constituents so that they may make sense of the events reflecting organizational change. This concept, however, has been scarcely addressed in the literature of higher education, as only Gigliotti (2016) has examined it comprehensively, but mostly as a retrospective, post-crisis sense-making process,

and not as an ongoing and prospective sense-giving process practiced by Chancellor Vitter. Therefore, I started contemplating how I could conceptualize Chancellor Vitter's practice of discursive leadership and how I could contextualize it into the Leadership and Ethics course that I teach in the Ole Miss Master of Business Administration (MBA) program.

**Discursive Leadership**

Discursive leadership is a social-influence dialogical process that is grounded in the leader-constituent member flow of meanings (in Greek, *dia* = flow and *logos* = meaning). In the context of higher education, most salient is the discursive leadership role of the chancellor (i.e. the principal, president, or rector). The primary mission of the chancellor as a discursive leader is to influence an inclusive, collaborative and sustained constituent engagement based on shared values such as integrity, civility, and fairness. The discursive leader aspires to inspire constituents' meaningful construction of institutional reality that is commonly unsettled when a change initiative is undertaken and affects all aspects of institutional context. Change initiatives are increasingly pursued in universities to produce a positive institutional

renewal that is imperative for survival in today's environment of higher education. The imperative for change is imposed primarily by a complex web of institutional stakeholders exerting often competing or contradictory demands for increasing efficiency and equitable effectiveness (Minei, 2015; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2016).

The main outcomes sought out through undertaking a change initiative are sustainable excellence in research, service, and learning. The major challenges to sustaining excellence in today's dynamic context of change are declining levels of private donations and state financing, higher federal supervision, scarcity of affordable student loans, increasing demands for creating and sustaining an inclusive diverse community, development of career-relevant curricula, delivery of online courses, and containing conflicts between faculty members and administration. These challenges that drive the need for change often create a situation that engenders a sense of a loss of shared identity among the institution's constituents. As a response to these situations, discursive leadership is critical for constituents to make sense of the events occurring in the changing environment and of the expected benefits of change (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016; 2017).

In the discursive leadership process, the leader frames institutional change while exhibiting sensitivity toward constituents because the change process involves both breaking old frames and constructing new frames such that the change initiative's actions may destabilize the identification of institutional community members. When the change-focused sense-giving process of discursive leadership embodies sensitivity towards constituents, they are more likely to reinterpret critical events through a shared, evolving lens of the institutional reality, and respond proactively to the change initiative by revising their shared

identity and by aligning it with the institution's goals. By framing the changing situation with a consideration to constituents' expectations, the discursive leader is likely to effectively mobilize constituents to a collective action that addresses the issues hindering the success of the change initiative (Fairhurst, 2011).

When the leader's considerate sense-giving about the need for a change successfully reframes constituents' expectations, discursive leadership will help them communicate the relevant patterns of meaningful cues signaling the benefits of the change initiatives. This patterning of situational cues not only enhances constituents' understanding of the evolving change, but also nudges them to voice back to the leader their suggestions related to the change initiative. Through this bidirectional discourse, a sense of shared identification in the changing institutional reality evolves as a social process. This social process of collective sense-making of the change initiative is both retrospective in that it engages the community's awareness toward revising the past shared identity and prospective to the extent that it aims to construct the future shared identity (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

Once the revised constituents' shared identity is stabilized and sustained across various situations experienced as a result of the change initiative, the leader's sense-giving will be aligned with the constituents' sense-making of the change. The alignment is important to reduce gaps in constituents' understanding of how the change initiative and its outcomes will affect their individual roles. Based on this meaningful understanding, constituents will likely reject speculative interpretations of change and preserve continuity of their shared identity. As a result, discursive leadership will evolve into an institution-wide process of constructive reinterpretation of the events occurring in the changing institution's

environment and motivate a concerted collective action supporting the change initiative (Gigliotti, 2016)

The process of understanding change can be accelerated when the leader develops and reiterates an effective sense-giving vocabulary that provides constituents with a sense of orientation while navigating the change process. A positive outcome of the constituents' reliance on the leader's vocabulary as a navigational device during the change process is reduced ambiguity of their initially often unrealistic or conflicting expectations. With more certain expectations about the future that the change is like to bring, constituents will better navigate the new institutional reality and accept the institution's vision (Gigliotti, 2016).

### **Discursive Leadership of Chancellor Vitter**

Dr. Jeffrey Vitter, the Chancellor of the University of Mississippi, has introduced discursive leadership as a novel communicative approach to practicing leadership in the domain of higher education. The warm and personal, yet even and firm tone of his communication-centered leadership approach is focused on framing meanings of ordinary and extraordinary events occurring in the community's environment. Using the principled language of the University's Creed, Mission, and Vision as resources, Chancellor Vitter frames each delicate situation that the institution faces with consideration and sensitivity that connect its community members. His reflexive and fluid discourse invites all constituents to engage in the process of securing community stability as the foundation of the University's betterment. For example, in his November 8, 2016 letter, emailed on the eve of the US Presidential elections, Chancellor Vitter referred to the University's Creed. Arguing that the Creed emphasizes respect for every individual's

viewpoint and that each person's viewpoint is to be accepted with fairness and civility, he reiterated how important mutual respect is to keep the university community safe. By prioritizing the institution's commitment to community safety, Chancellor Vitter responded in a timely, meaningful manner to problems from the broader community that could have been mapped onto the institution's context.

In his discourse, Chancellor Vitter presents each challenging situation that the University of Mississippi faces through the lens of his personal values that resonate with those articulated in the Institution's Creed (i.e. fairness, integrity, and stewardship). In particular, he relates these shared values to critical events that occur in order to uncover how the events arose. For example, when the controversy ascended about the University Halls named after local historical figures (e.g. Lamar, Vardaman, etc.) with connections to slavery, Chancellor Vitter formed a highly competent Chancellor's Advisory Committee on History and Context to contextualize these names as well as scrutinize the lives that they led. By acting impartially and with reference to the shared values on this controversy, Chancellor Vitter exemplified his resolve never to shirk from addressing transparently challenging situations or events occurring in the institution's evolving environment.

Chancellor Vitter initiated also a transparent discourse on the issues of: 1) the termination of playing "Dixie" during University sporting events; 2) the removal of the Mississippi State Flag from the University campus; and 3) a community member's racist reaction to a church shooting in South Carolina. He always makes sure that his discourse on challenging issues is clear and sincere and takes the form of a meaningful dialogue, encouraging that constituents prefer talking *with* one another

rather than *at* one another with their attention focused on the future of the institution. For example, he made sure that the Flagship Forum engendered a community-wide dialogue that mobilized the willpower and enthusiasm of the University of Mississippi's constituents and secured their commitment to foster community growth and aspiration to move the Institution from a great to a greater level of excellence.

By communicating with sincerity and clarity, Chancellor Vitter has inspired the collective efforts to transform the Institution's brand from being a state brand to becoming a national and international brand. In support of these efforts, he advocates the continued use of the *Ole Miss* name for three reasons. First, the name is as an endeared term and revered name to the University's alumni. Second, evidence from a Google search for information on the University reveals that the term "Ole Miss" is used seven times more frequently as a search term than the term, "University of Mississippi." Finally, the name has gained a widespread, favorable national recognition. These are specific reasons why Chancellor Vitter encourages the community members' practice of referring to themselves as "Ole Miss" family members. In the same vein of supporting name redefinition, Chancellor Vitter argues that the name *Rebel* should be used in a redefined manner to connote that Rebels are entrepreneurs and leaders who always challenge the prevailing status quo. His support is grounded in the fact that the university owns both the "Ole Miss" and "Rebel" names, and therefore he suggests that both names should be retained as critical components of the Institution's brand management strategies that promote the University's positive image.

Particularly delicate was Chancellor Vitter's discourse with stakeholders related to the use of symbols on campus. In this discourse, the Chancellor emphasized that the use of

symbols should be determined comprehensively through the avoidance of politics and guidance of experts so that the most appropriate symbols are selected. For example, while the State's flag is no longer flown on the University's campus, Ole Miss recently raised the bicentennial flag to commemorate two-hundred years of Mississippi Statehood. Also, while the University Grays are commemorated in Ventress Hall, they are not contextualized in the University's plaque placed next to the Civil War statue located on campus grounds because the statue had not been erected to commemorate the University Grays but to honor the Lafayette Veterans of the Civil War, thereby advancing the "lost cause" ideology grounded in the beliefs that the war was not begun to address the merits of whether or not the United States should allow slavery, but a matter of state independence.

The discursive leadership of Chancellor Vitter, exemplified in his communicative approach to addressing these above and other emerging challenges is rich in meanings that have the potential of reshaping constituents' identification with the Institution. As the discourse initiated by Chancellor Vitter has evolved into a community-wide bidirectional dialogue conducted through vertical and horizontal exchanges of symbolic meanings, it has become relevant to the way constituents perceive the impact of change on their role identity. The broadened and enriched discourse motivates constituents to innovate their individual roles and to adapt them to fit the changing institutional environment. The constituent role innovation occurs because Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership informs the process by which constituents can meaningfully link their values, expectations, and aspirations to their innovated roles in the change process.

For the formation of this link, it is not only the context of Chancellor Vitter's

discursive leadership that matters, but also its timing. The interplay of the timing and the context engenders a “sound of silence” whereby what is communicated and what is not communicated equally matter (Reuben & Gigliotti, 2017). To make this sound of silence “heard” in the community, Chancellor Vitter reiterates, as a refrain in all of his communication, the significance of the: 1) Flagship Forum of a hundred-day listening and learning tour that involved interacting with thousands of constituents; 2) Town Hall meetings with constituents that produced hundreds of ideas on how to advance the Institution; and 3) Flagship Constellation Initiative launched to catalyze multidisciplinary research initiatives aimed at uncovering solutions that could transform communities. The focus of all these initiatives is on achieving academic and athletic excellence and creating lively, diverse, healthy, and vibrant communities by relying on constituents, places and resources as the key enablers for change.

Chancellor Vitter’s discursive leadership goes beyond mere conveyance of information because his sense-giving also projects meanings grounded in the Institution’s unifying codes, principles, and symbols, which make the core of the Institution’s identity as shared by constituents. The vocabulary of his mindful framing can be structured into a checklist that could be instrumental during newcomer socialization in explaining local meanings of the key terms relevant to acquiring the context-specific institutional literacy, accelerating their identification with the institution. This literacy is also important for the development of newcomer felt self-accountability for reference to the Institution’s core values (i.e. integrity, civility, fairness) embodied in its Creed. The checklist would likely reduce their role ambiguity because it could help them meaningfully decode the

established Institutional lexicon, phrases, and symbols. The vocabulary for the checklist can be identified from the keywords accentuated in Chancellor Vitter’s letters, blogs, posts, and speeches and interpreted by unpacking how they are meaningfully, coherently, credibly and transparently crafted, framed, problem-focused, and timely incorporated in a caring language of sense-giving that is tailored to engender community engagement by resonating with the University’s mission and values.

The vocabulary of Chancellor Vitter’s sense-giving process is reiterated in his communications to facilitate meaningful interpretation of the change initiative aimed at the transformation of the Institution. The vocabulary symbolically paves the way for new community members to connect Chancellor Vitter’s discourse and the Institution’s mission and values because the vocabulary selects and accentuates meaningful anchors for identification of constituents such that they can rely on these anchors during the change process. Once this connection is established, it is likely that it will transform the newcomers’ mindset and sentiments by nudging them to embrace change with reflection and civility, even when they may question some aspects of the change initiative.

Establishing this connection is particularly critical when the change initiative entails the adoption of novel operational practices such as online delivery, digitization, social-media communication and cloud-based platforms, and novel strategic practices that support the Institution’s Flagship orientation toward honing its competence in data science, big data, data analytics, cyber security, and precision medicine. Chancellor Vitter promotes the adoption of these innovative practices by framing persuasively and knowledgeably their relevance for accomplishing the University’s

vision. His framing nudges all constituents to imagine how the adoption of innovative practices will eventually make the university community a better place for both academic learning and community development.

### **Contextualizing Chancellor Vitter's Discursive Leadership**

As a guest speaker in my MBA class, Chancellor Vitter reiterated a repertoire of his signature themes that he regularly communicates through multiple channels, including emails, blogs and social media outlets. These themes serve as guides for constituents to assign meanings to ambiguous events occurring in the Institution's internal and external environment. With reference to his guest speaking session, I gave an assignment to the MBA students taking my Leadership and Ethics class to trace Chancellor Vitter's signature themes across various media, platforms, and other communication channels and to assess how these themes can be instrumental to the orientation and socialization of international newcomers to the university community.

Specifically, I requested my students to examine these themes and identify a vocabulary of key words that could be assembled as a checklist of symbols, principles, and values. The vocabulary should comprise all of the key words that could be communicated in the orientation sessions and socialization programs organized for the international newcomers, with the purpose that the newcomers could eventually develop appropriate assumptions about their individual and collective roles in the Institution as it undergoes change. The ultimate goal is that the international newcomers meaningfully understand a set of: a) specific expectations of how quality relationships could be formed to fit the institutional culture that support change; and b) meanings underlying the vocabulary of the institution's jargon, analogies, and metaphors as

they are used in framing positive change. Most importantly, the checklist built on the vocabulary derived from Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership should be instrumental to enacting a climate of understanding between the Institution's incumbent and international newcomer constituents when engaging in the Institution's change initiative.

The vocabulary identified by my students comprised of the following key words: inclusion, diversity, fairness, justice, civility, respect, dignity, integrity, academic honesty, academic freedom, good stewardship of resources, contextualization of UM history, global responsibility, critical thinking, community engagement, internationalization, care, tradition, shared identity, mission and vision, Creed, acceptance, excellence, town hall practice, Flagship Constellations, Flagship Forum, Hotty Toddy, Ole Miss, Rebel, and Land Shark. The checklist built on this vocabulary should not provide mere translations of these terms, but additionally address their underlying meanings in ways that credibly represent the Ole Miss culture and appropriately guide the newcomer towards achieving an operable understanding of the Ole Miss collaborative code of conduct and their expected role behaviors as new community members.

### **Conclusion**

Chancellor Vitter both senses and paces the pulse of Ole Miss through his competent and honest communicative presence on various social media platforms where he listens mindfully and converses openly with the Ole Miss Community members. His ambition is to enact at Ole Miss a thriving world-class institutional climate of inclusion and collaboration in which a greater form of excellence can emerge. His discursive leadership that fosters this ambition involves framing of a positive future by using vocabulary that is

capable of attributing specific meanings to change events occurring in the Institution's environment. Through his sincere, transparent, and positive discourse, Chancellor Vitter proactively prevents constituents' negative attributions of the change initiative that are undertaken.

In this article, I described the inputs of my MBA students, indicating how the texts of Chancellor Vitter's discursive leadership can be used as a source to identify a vocabulary that is useful to guide the socialization of newcomer constituents. For constituents in general, and international newcomers in particular, the checkpoints built on the vocabulary could help each member develop meaningful and positive assumptions about the future course of the Institution. The positive outcome of his discursive leadership is not only a creation of constituents' motivated, inspired, and bold understanding of the Institution's situation and change, but also their active engagement in the collective efforts of realizing the benefits of the change initiatives (Bunch, Fillingim & Blackburn, 2012)

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**Milorad Novicevic** is an Associate Professor of Management at The University of Mississippi. His research focused on examining leadership in historical, global, and educational contexts. He has published around 150 articles in peer-reviewed journals including *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Journal of Education for Business*, *Quality Assurance in Education*, *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal* and *International Journal of Management Education*. **Dr. Novicevic** can be contacted at [mnovicevic@bus.olemiss.edu](mailto:mnovicevic@bus.olemiss.edu)