



**2008 MBA Commencement Speech**  
*Dean Deborah Merrill-Sands*

And now it is my privilege to share some final reflections with the Class of 2008. First, on behalf of the faculty and staff, we celebrate your ambition, your hard work, your tenacity, and your stellar achievement in earning your MBA.

I love my job as dean of this School, because I am passionate about our mission of educating women for power and principled leadership.

And, you – our 34<sup>th</sup> graduating class – have come together from many different nations, states, and types of organizations and jobs to don the mantle of the Simmons mission and carry it forward.

As you take up this mantle and move on with your professional lives, my aspiration – and indeed my admonition – for each of you is that you make two choices. First, that you choose leadership. Your Simmons MBA gives you the knowledge, skills, networks, and confidence you need to lead, but only you can make that choice. I ask you, and challenge you, to take this investment that you have made in yourself – your MBA – and boldly put it to work as a leader.

And, as you choose leadership, my second admonition is that you harness what you have learned in your Simmons MBA to make a second choice – you choose very explicitly how you lead.

Too often, through an uncritical lens, we assume that leadership is inherently good. Yet, we know only too well from experience, that it is not. Leaders can build high-performing teams dedicated to winning, but they can choose to win no matter the cost. Leaders can mobilize groups to action, but the action can harm others in the name of moral or political rectitude. And, leaders can usurp their power for personal gain and fame, destroying the very values on which their organizations have been built. We know that is not how we should choose to lead.

With our focus on principled leadership, we have said leading itself is not enough. It is how you lead – how you hold yourself accountable to your followers, to your stakeholders, and to your organization – that distinguishes you as a successful leader.

Since the first day you joined the Simmons School of Management, we have asked you to reflect on the tenets of principled leadership as a guiding framework for your own leadership. And that is our final request today. No leader will ever get it right all the time; it is challenging and demanding work. But if you use principled leadership as your compass, you will get it right much of the time.

First, as principled leaders, we have asked you to examine every decision you make, large or small, unfailingly against a code of ethics and guiding values, and to measure your success as a leader not only in terms of the results you produce but also in terms of the integrity you exhibit in achieving those results.

In the Martha McCaskey case most of you worked in Foundations and in the World.com case you worked two weeks ago in your final Strategy class, you saw starkly how easily a single decision of questionable ethics can set any one of us down a slippery slope that can be impossible to reverse. So remember Betty Winston and Martha McCaskey when you are faced with one of those inevitable ethical dilemmas that all leaders face, and stop and take the time to reflect, question, and gather information so that you can step back from the slippery slope and find an alternative course of action.

Second, we have asked you to hold yourself accountable to those key groups who hold a stake in your organization, not only shareholders in for-profit companies, or donors in the not-for-profit world, but to your employees, customers, suppliers, and partners.

Many of you in your Strategy class cited COSTCO as an example of a company that does this right. COSTCO wins in the low-cost retail market place precisely because it invests in its employees and reaps the benefits of employee loyalty and retention. It can be done.

And third, we have asked you to hold yourself accountable not only for short-term success and profitability, but for the long-term impact of your leadership decisions on the societies that have given you license to operate, and on the environment and the resources we bestow to future generations. This, I know, is the most challenging aspect of principled leadership, because all the metrics and incentives drive for short-term results. But, today we have powerful examples of companies that have made different choices – companies such as Toyota, Xerox, NuCOR Steel, Genzyme, HP, PepsiCo, and Whole Foods – that have successfully integrated accountability for profitability with accountability for sustainability and social responsibility within their business strategy, and they are winning in the marketplace. They show us that this can be done.

So, as you leave today to put your MBA to work, I invite you to choose – choose leadership and choose principled leadership.

Just imagine the difference we can make if each one of us enacts principled leadership to the best of our ability and call for it in our organizations. This is not a facile commitment, I am not naïve, but, for me, this is the full promise of your Simmons MBA. And that promise is yours. Hold on to it.

Congratulations on behalf of the faculty and staff. We look forward to claiming you proudly as our alumnae.