

A Conversation from the Trenches: 3 Leaders Talk about Working and Managing at Carnegie Mellon

We sat down with three leaders at the university to get a snapshot of what it's like managing a group at Carnegie Mellon. Susan Bassett joined Carnegie Mellon as the new Director of Athletics about two years ago. Jim Mercolini, Assistant General Counsel, left the world of corporate law to join Carnegie Mellon's legal team about 5 years ago. Cheryl Wehrer, Associate Director of Finance and Administration for Robotics, came to Carnegie Mellon as a student, and never left. She's in her 18th year on the staff of the university. Their different perspectives from their various positions at the university, tenures with Carnegie Mellon, and professional backgrounds lead to a fascinating discussion of what makes Carnegie Mellon special, and what it takes to be successful here.

HR: Tell me about your background and what you're doing now.

JM: I come from a very different environment than this. I worked for many years as a partner at a regional law firm that was headquartered in Pittsburgh, and I had the good fortune of having been recruited to go to that law firm by my current boss, our General Counsel Mary Jo Dively. She's assembled a team of people that staff our office that have all worked together. So we've all known each other for a long time. But in a very different environment.

SB: I have had a career in intercollegiate athletics. 15 years coaching in men's and women's swimming at small private liberal arts colleges in upstate New York, so I'm also from a very different environment. And then I was fortunate to get into athletics administration at Union College and then became the Director of Athletics at William Smith of Hobart & William Smith Colleges. I'm in my third year at Carnegie Mellon and I couldn't be happier.

CW: So my background is different than the two of you. I've been at Carnegie Mellon pretty much forever. I started at the university right after I finished my bachelor's degree, which I also did at Carnegie Mellon, so this spring will be my 18th year. I studied economics as an undergrad at the university, and then was fortunate to get my MBA at Tepper while I was working here full-time, so I have the really long shot perspective, going all the way back to the 80's, when I was an undergraduate here. I work now in the Robotics Institute now as the Associate Director for Finance and Administration.

HR: What is most surprising or unique about the Carnegie Mellon environment?

JM: I said before how I come from a very different environment than this. As a partner in a large law firm, the motivation for much of what you do is to improve your own professional profile and personal financial position. Carnegie Mellon is a very different environment for me, in large part because of the sense of shared commitment to the university community and vision. It may sound corny, but I do believe that for most people, their hearts really are "in the work." Many members of our community could make significantly more money in the corporate world, so they're not here to get rich. They're here because Carnegie Mellon offers them the opportunity to do challenging work and to collaborate with other people who are phenomenally bright and creative leaders in their fields.

SB: I certainly was aware of Carnegie Mellon's world-class reputation academically. And I was impressed when I went through the search process. But being here, it's an even more impressive place. After 2 ½ years, seeing how hard people work, and the level of excellence in all that we do, it's really remarkable. What's exciting for me, and the reason I was motivated to come here, was the idea of building something in athletics, wellness and recreation. I think we can create something that will be transformative for the community in what we aspire to achieve in our programs. So from that perspective, it's fun.

JM: I would add that I think Cheryl's experience here is really telling. The fact that she was a student here and wanted to build her professional life here is sort of a common theme on our campus. There are a lot of people who feel that way and really do consider this home.

CW: Right, I think there is a large group of staff, compared to other institutions, that have been here as students, and stay here because they love the sense of community. I think the university really is special and unique. Part of me says I've been here so long nothing surprises me. But one of the things that continues to surprise me is our impact globally when you take into account our size. We are still a small organization in the scheme of the world, but I think if you look at our impact, it's really pretty amazing. There's always something new.

SB: One thing that I would add to all of this is that I was expecting it to be a very serious, and segmented place with faculty who are unapproachable, and I have found quite the opposite. A very friendly community, welcoming and very helpful in terms of the transition.

CW: I think our faculty are super, down-to-earth, very approachable. When I talk with my staff in my unit about what they like best about working in the Robotics Institute, the answer that I get back is "The faculty. We love the faculty; we love the students; we love that we're in academia, and just get to interact with these people." Everyone sets such high goals for themselves. Everyone is operating at this really high level and other people feed off of that. So you see what everyone around you is doing and it gives you this extra incentive to do more and to do better.

HR: What are the skills and strengths that make someone successful at Carnegie Mellon?

JM: Being open-minded is essential. On my very first day of work, Mary Jo sat me down and said "A couple of things you need to know. Number one, you can't send out a global email. Only a handful of people have that ability. And you really shouldn't tell people that they can't do things." She's got a very service-oriented perspective for our department. As a lawyer, you're trained to analyze issues within a certain framework. In our environment, though, legal considerations can't be viewed in isolation and can't drive all of our decisions. After joining Carnegie Mellon, I learned very quickly to think a little more "outside the legal box." The people in this community bring so many creative ideas and valuable insights to the table that you really need to be ... willing to sit down in a group, listen to other points of view, and rethink issues on which you may have had a very clear initial legal perspective. I think creativity, for that reason, is also essential.

SB: I think in my world, it's passion for the students and passion for their experience. I think if that's at the core of your approach to things, you're going to be very successful here. I tell our staff, "Figure out a way to say 'yes.' Figure out a way that we can accommodate everyone's interests and needs and let's do it with a smile and have some fun while we do it."

CW: I echo Susan's comment. Find a way to say 'yes.' One of the things I try to do as a manager is encourage my staff to look for solutions. You have to be part of the solution to get us moving forward. So when there are reasons we can't do something, you have to say to yourself "What is the big picture, and what could we do in the future? How are we going to handle this the next time this comes up?" Something that I also think is really important as a manager is flexibility and communication. You have to get into the environment and get to know the people around you, because people receive and respond to communication in very different manners. So you sort of figure out "I know that an email to Jim is going to work, and I know that for Susan I need to either call or stop by her office." You can't just say "OK, I'm going to do more communication." You really have to stop and figure out everyone's style and decide how I can really get to them so we can be effective together.

HR: What are some of the challenges that you find working at Carnegie Mellon?

JM: all run sort of lean and mean. It's a reality for both the administrative units and the academic units. Because of our limited resources, it's sometimes difficult to meet everyone's objectives on the timeline that they would like. I spend my mornings trying to reprioritize my day's work, to get things done when they need to be done. So many things that we do are time critical. Another thing that makes it difficult is that we're not just growing as a business in the United States. We have a pretty incredible rate of growth in international programs. I'm a lawyer who is versed in US laws. Every year, we're going into more countries, where all of the employment laws, benefit laws, immigration laws are all new and different. It requires lots of people on the administrative end, as well as the academic folks involved in the program, to get up to speed on lots of new issues overnight. So, it's a constant struggle to prioritize.

SB: I absolutely agree with Jim. In our world, that translates to facilities. We have an antiquated facility in Skibo Gymnasium. I think our staff has been very creative with very limited space. We have every possible moment scheduled in our recreational and athletic spaces. But it is a real challenge. The other thing is that because Carnegie Mellon's been so academically focused, my folks have felt a little underappreciated. We've been working hard to say, "We're here for a reason and we have a contribution to make. We're important to the life of the campus." Sometimes I hear, "Well, we've always done it this way," and I say "Why?" and we change our approach. We've really maximized what we can do with our staff and our facilities, to a point where I feel good about what we're offering and I think our staff can too.

CW: I think it's key to maximize the resources you *do* have and get buy-in from everyone that you're working with. In my area, probably the biggest challenge I face day in and day out is (limited) resources. A lot of system related resources, having adequate staffing for all of the requirements that are put upon us. As life goes on and we become larger and more global, that requires a higher level of detail and excellence. A lot of the administrative work goes on in the background. But when you look at the big picture of the university, when the next \$25 million gift comes they don't say, "Oh let's spend it on administration!" You have to go do the newest, sexiest field. It's really a struggle to maximize what you have, and to make sure that the people and resources that you do have are appreciated and recognized. So you have to make sure that we realize that people are doing their best with sometimes not the perfect set of tools.

HR: What would you do differently, based on what you know now?

JM: I wish that I had taken a month off and spent more time out in our academic units getting to better understand them. There's such diversity among them, in terms of their business models, their objectives. I recognize that things are fluid and change over time, but I still got that information (about the different units) the hard way. I was thrust in situations where I needed to get up to speed quickly. It would have been nice to have a better appreciation for what each of the academic units is all about - their personality and culture, their business model.

CW: I echo that. It takes time, especially coming in new, to learn what you're in for, and who's who. One of the fortunate things in my career is that I've moved from one department to another. In 18 years, I'm in my fourth department. I have had the advantage and privilege of working in both academic units and in the central administration. I think that's really important to have these different perspectives. Because you look at things in a different way when you've been working in the central administration for 10 years versus you're in an academic unit your entire career. So "What do you wish you knew?" I think just getting perspectives from other areas. That's tough because we're so busy, and it's incredibly hard to make the time to sit with Chemistry and Robotics and Statistics. So it's a struggle.

SB: I think I actually came in with eyes wide open. I wish I would have understood a little better how resource-challenged we were. Not that I would change anything, but that has been something that has been ... more of an adjustment than I expected.

HR: What accomplishments that you've achieved here are you most proud of?

CW: That's a tough one. How about surviving all of our new systems and requirements coming out of those systems. Keeping up with all the changes, and keeping staff informed with what these changes are and why. A lot of my background has been in different financial areas, so it's an accomplishment to have helped lead the way and paved some of these changes with Oracle Financials upgrades and changes over time. I think I'm in a unique position where I've done some of that work centrally and then have had to live as an end-user in the department, so I think I lend pretty good perspective when we're trying to move systems forward.

Jim: Before Mary Jo came here (about a year before I did), the university had not had an in-house counsel. My crew has been good at creating inroads into Carnegie Mellon's business that has allowed us to provide advice in a way that wasn't familiar to people. Most people think of lawyers and HR functions and those things as just part of the bureaucracy - somebody else who's going to say "no" and be a roadblock that's going to slow us down. It's really by creating inroads and establishing relationships with people that you're brought into the decision-making process, early enough that you don't end up being a roadblock. If you get a phone call the day before something's going to happen and there is something they did not consider, you are going to have to put the brakes on and slow things down. You have the most meaningful impact when people call you before taking action or embarking on a new initiative to say, "Let's talk through this and think about the different ways that it may play out."

SB: We've done a lot in our department that has helped our staff be more focused and effective in what they need to do for our students. We're certainly pleased with facility development - creating a new varsity weight room and completing a rehabilitation of Gesling Stadium that makes it one of the premier Division III stadiums. But most importantly, in each of our areas, II

think we have created a greater sense of pride for the students in what they're doing and what they're getting out of those programs. That's really important to us. I think certainly the student athletes feel much more valued and the recognition program we're putting in place for them has inspired them to feel good about themselves.

HR: What advice do you have for someone hoping to advance their career here?

JM: Leverage on the resources of the institution. There are so many incredibly bright, thoughtful people both in the administration and academic units of this institution, and in my experience, they're always willing to share their time and offer their advice. Capitalize on that. It makes life so much easier here.

SB: I would say, "Get ready to be inspired, because you're going to be working with people who are all about excellence and so it's a fun environment that way and you're going to have to work hard, but it'll feel good."

CW: I would encourage someone to find a good a mentor, someone other than their direct manager, who can lend a different viewpoint. Take advantage of the programs out there, such as the Learning and Development offerings. We're so busy, but you really have to force yourself to make that time to invest in things that are outside of your immediate bubble. Because it would be really easy for all of us just to sit in our bubble and do our job day in and day out. We have to make time to get out of that shell and have a greater perspective for what the university is all about.

JM: Don't hesitate to reach out to people. The number of things that I'm working on at any given time can seem overwhelming, but I manage to get the work done. That's due in part to the fact that in 4 ½ years here, I have never reached out to anyone for their advice or help that I didn't get an immediate response and willing assistance. That's pretty extraordinary, given how busy everyone is.

SB: It is also important is to take advantage of the Learning and Development programs here. I signed on for the New Leader Assimilation workshop with Ron Placone, and that was a wonderful experience. I thought it was very helpful to our staff in coming to know me because there were 35 of them, and they all had questions and this was a forum where they could ask anything they wanted. I think it was really healthy and helpful. I would encourage people to take advantage of those programs.

HR: Where do you see your areas and the university as a whole going in the next 5 years?

JM: The world is our oyster. My guess would be that we'll expand into new locations around the world every year, and build new relationships with colleges, universities and corporations in those countries that will benefit our students around the globe. Each of those new ventures will create new challenges for us legally as we learn to navigate the laws of different countries. At the same time, my personal objective is to find more time to go out and educate our campus community about legal issues. Faculty, staff and students alike have a genuine interest in learning about the legal issues that we face so that they can comply with our legal and regulatory obligations.

CW: We're going to the moon in 2009. Isn't that a great answer for "Where are we going in the next 5 years?" I think the options are endless. In Robotics, it's more technology, and more sponsored projects. Part of what I'm tasked with is having everything run more or less seamlessly in the background, so that the faculty and the students and the staff can make everything happen and get us to the moon without too many administrative hassles.

SB: Our big dream is to build a new campus wellness and fitness center, and I hope we can do that, or be close to having that started in five years. And I absolutely am convinced that will transform campus life if we do it the right way in the right scope. I think, as we improve campus life and student life, our stature as an institution will only increase.

HR: What is required to keep your staff happy, motivated and focused?

JM: I think I speak for everyone in the Office of General Counsel when I say that we genuinely like and respect each other. In fact, most of us worked together before coming to Carnegie Mellon. Plus, we get to work on interesting and exciting legal issues, and collaborate with some of the smartest people in the world. I think that's our motivation.

CW: I think as a manager it's important to not try to solve problems yourself. It's really critical to seek input of those around you. You want the team to feel like they're owning everything together, not think "Here's the next directive that's come from on high." You actually find better solutions when you include everyone and take the time to get all of the input. Make sure that you've heard people. That's something that I've about thought about a lot as a manager and that I have heard from my staff. Make sure there are plenty and different types of opportunities for people to be heard. Then get your action plan together and get more feedback. "OK, are we all on the same page?" When people feel that they own it, that's what motivates them.

JM: *That's* what's different about CMU. In a traditional corporate environment, things tended to change very drastically. Here, it's more about consensus building. The education component is more important. The ability to listen to people is more important. And I think for that reason, we tend to change incrementally, to the extent that we have control over the rate of change.

SB: I think it's important to remind everyone on our staff what contribution they're making to the end product. And the great thing about Carnegie Mellon is we're not making widgets. We're transforming the students' lives, and that's really why we're *all* here. To see a student come in as a child, and leave as an adult is really an exceptional opportunity and privilege. I believe we're creating future leaders in virtually every industry across the country. I try to remind everybody that we work with that that's why we're here and they have a role to play in that. Please and thank you goes a long way too, and new sneakers every once in a while too.

HR: So is there any other advice you'd to share with people about working here?

CW: I think you do your best, and it really pays off. The nice thing about the university is there are lots of different opportunities for people to contribute in different ways. People come into the organization with a set of things that we're looking for from the position. But in short order, people are operating a little out of that circle and doing different things. One of the great things about this university is it lets you do what you're good at. It lets you make the best contribution

where you can. Because we're small and flexible enough, we can really find the best in everyone and use it to move forward.

SB: I think it's important to get out, so that you understand the context that you're working in. So I go to a performance in Drama and in Music, and I watch the buggy races and follow Red. Connect periodically with other parts of the university so that you remember the context and can be inspired by *all* of the work that's done. If we all work in silos, or just go to our own office every day, and really aren't engaged, I think you'll have missed a big opportunity.

JM: I used to force myself to read a bunch of newspapers every morning before I left my house. Now one of the things I force myself to do is open up our web page every day so I know what's going on here. Because it's easy to get left behind if you haven't read the latest news.