

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly explore just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, nationally renowned sports writers, sports legends, and heads of major business concerns, community activists, and developers. Today our guest is none other than Dr James R. Ramsey. He's the 17th and current president of the University of Louisville. And I'm going to speed through his very eclectic bio folks so just bear with me here. He was named the 17th president of the University of Louisville on November 14, 2002 which happened to be his 54th birthday. Ramsey is a Kentucky native. He holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Western Kentucky University and a master's and PhD in economics from the University of Kentucky. Dr Ramsey is also a professor of economics and public administration. Ramsey previously held professional positions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Western Kentucky University, Middle Tennessee University, and Loyola University, excuse me. He is an accomplished scholar and teacher with more than listen to this 60 publications in the fields of Economics and Management. Dr Ramsay has worked aggressively to move the university closer to its goal of becoming a preeminent metropolitan institution of higher learning through five critically strategic areas: educational quality, extramural research, campus diversity, community partnerships, and accountability. Major academic accomplishments completed since he took office include an increase of over 200 million dollars in the school's endowment, doubling of federal research funding, and an increase of two points in the

school's average ACT scores, improvement in student retention, and a rapidly increasing enrollment from areas outside the Louisville area. He's a frequent national speaker and writer on economic issues in the public sector. Ramsey received the National Governors Association's Outstanding Public Service Award in 2001 and he was named Kentucky's distinguished economist of the Year in 1999. Now how's this for leadership folks, I got to go off here for the second one, Dr Ramsey received some startling news after his annual physical. He began making exercise literally an appointment on his calendar and to date he has lost over 30 pounds. Now that's a testament to leadership. "I used to drink." Quote "10 diet soft drinks a day and eat a lot of sweets. I had to cut back on the sweets and cut out the caffeine." Ramsey decided that to accomplish that he would have his secretary schedule it on his calendar just as he does all the priorities of his job. "I schedule my runs just like a meeting" he says. And at 4:00 about three times a week I have a scheduled work out." I think it's cool. I don't do that. Dr Ramsey and his wife Jane Ramsey who also shares his love for public service have two daughters named Jenny and Jackie. Welcome Dr Ramsey to Leadership Landscape. Quite an honor to have you here. I really appreciate having you.

James Ramsey: Thank you. Pleased to be here.

Kirt Jacobs: Thank you. Well the first question we ask all of our guest is what drives you to do what you've done? I mean just what you did with the physical aspect I hope you don't mind me sharing that.

James Ramsey: No not at all.

Kirt Jacobs: Is really insightful into the kind of leader that you are but what drives you to do what you have done? You have a very eclectic background.

James Ramsey: Both of my parents were school teachers and believed very much in public service. And I was brought up to believe that that was very important. And so I love education and everything I've done even when I was state budget director

really sort of tied back to trying to advance the public policy agenda of Kentucky and certainly education is the driver I think of our long term economic future and the quality of life for our people. So that's my passion and so that's what drives me every day.

Kirt Jacobs: OK. Whom do you credit most influential in your life Dr. Ramsey? And it can be more than one person.

James Ramsey: I worked for a dynamic leader when I was at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill a gentleman by the name of Michael Hooker.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

James Ramsey: And Michael recruited me and wanted me to be part of his team. Michael believed in me and Michael was just a fascinating individual who would say our goal at the University of North Carolina was not to be one of the best public institutions but to be the best institution. And so he set high goals high bars for us. And Michael you know had sort of an air about him but he said Jim I can't accomplish the goal of making us the number one public institution without your help. And he believed in me in a very special way and he had a profound impact on me in his life. And then while I was at Chapel Hill he died of cancer and I think that that experience in Michael's death probably had even more of a profound influence on me because I realized Michael died at 53-years-old.

Kirt Jacobs: Really.

James Ramsey: And it made me realize life's short and we better give it our best shot every day. Life's not fair. It's not perfect but work hard do the very best you can every day and have a passion for what you do. I've had some mentors in my life. Jack Siegel who a lot of people locally would know and was a mentor to many people including Mayor Abramson and others was a great influence more of a mentor

Kirt Jacobs: OK

James Ramsey: perhaps. And then been married for 35 years and Jane and I dated for five years before that so I guess if somebody is part of your life for nearly 40 years they have a significant influence on you.

Kirt Jacobs: I got you.

(laughter)

Kirt Jacobs: Good answer. What was the most defining moment of your life Dr Ramsey? You know it could be professional or personal. Could be more than one.

James Ramsey: There been several and interestingly the person who used to talk about defining moments a lot was Governor Paul Patton when I worked for him a state budget director. I had been through an experience in the early 1990s that questioned my belief in myself. And Governor Patton called me while I was working at Western Kentucky University as me to come be his budget director. And I really didn't know if I could do that job. Didn't know if I had the confidence to do it. I did go to work for Governor Patton. Took a leave from Western. And we got through a very tough first budget. And the night that the Governor Patton introduced his budget to the General Assembly I sat on the floor of the General Assembly with the governor who was up of course at the podium.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

James Ramsey: I was seeing on the floor with members of the General Assembly. And Governor Patton recognize me for my contributions in his speech and in almost as one in unison the members of the General Assembly rose and applauded. And it was a defining moment because the confidence and self respect that I was questioning in my own life sort of those issues I think I put to rest in my own mind. That I can do things that I don't think I can do and I can accomplish things that maybe I don't think I can accomplish. I think that that more than anything else. There been some, With Michael's death was a defining moment.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure it was.

James Ramsey: It was of that point in time that I knew it was time for me to leave Chapel and come back home. I'm from here. Fern Creek. My wife is from South Louisville. This is our home. This is where our families were. We did a lot of neat things while Michael was alive. And I always thought boy you know would be neat to be doing these things in Kentucky. It was Michael's death was a defining moment and was what resulted in us coming back home.

Kirt Jacobs: If there is one Dr Ramsey what is your biggest professional regret? In other words is there something you would have done differently. Could be more than one.

James Ramsey: Not really.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

James Ramsey: You know I like some of the old music and I remember a Cher song If I Could Turn Back Time.

Kirt Jacobs: Not going to sing it are you?

James Ramsey: No no you don't want me to sing it. That would blow it.

Kirt Jacobs: Yeah

James Ramsey: But we can't turn back time.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

James Ramsey: And I've made a lot of mistakes but I've always tried to learn from those mistakes but I really don't have any professional regrets. I've had a... I've been very very blessed. I've had some great opportunities. I've had the opportunity to work with some truly outstanding people and the people like Michael Hooker and others who have had the influence on me. Had profound influence on me or the people who believed in me. And

so I don't want to say I have lived a totally charmed life. There have been disappointments and bumps in the road but I've learned from every experience. I don't have any professional regrets.

Kirt Jacobs: OK On the flipside of that our next question is what's your biggest professional triumph? Can be more than one. It can be personal as well.

James Ramsey: I am a big believer in teams and so I don't know that I've ever really accomplished anything. But I've been part

Kirt Jacobs: I read your bio. You are being modest my friend.

James Ramsey: Well I've been part of some organizations, groups, and teams that have done a lot of things. One of the things that was most difficult for me was when I was state budget director in the General Assembly adjourned without passing a budget. And we faced a very difficult issue. What do we do? It is the Constitution says it's the General Assembly's responsibility to enact the budget and they didn't do it. And so Governor Patton called a special session of the General Assembly to deal with the budget issues. And again they didn't deal with it. And so we were left with what do we do? Do we shut down government? Do we shut down schools? Do we shut down parks? Do we shut down everything? Transportation.

Kirt Jacobs: Right

James Ramsey: Do we try to define what are critical government services and what are not critical government services? And that's difficult to do. In fact there was a Supreme Court case years and years ago that said The State Fair was a critical government service. So you know how do you make those decisions?

Kirt Jacobs: Interesting

James Ramsey: And or just continue to move on and put in place a spending plan that tried to move Kentucky forward. Tried to provide for our needs in education and so forth. And so that was the

decision we made and we knew that it would be challenged. And it was in the courts. And so trying to work through that issue probably was the most difficult thing that I've really professionally had to deal with. But we put together a team. We worked hard. We rolled up our sleeves. Talked to a lot of people. Did a lot of research. Put together a spending plan and the government continued to operate and we really avoided what I think was a crisis in our state that otherwise might not have been avoided. So to be part of that and there were a lot of people involved. People in the budget office. Certainly the governor's support but that was something that I as I look back was very proud of. I'm very proud of the things that are happening at the University of Louisville in terms of our research programs, in terms of our better students that we're getting, in terms of our graduation rates, in terms of what we're doing academically and what we're doing for this community but that's a team effort and I'm just if anything I'm just the quarterback or the coach.

Kirt Jacobs: Got you.

James Ramsey: You know I'm supposed to call the plays and provide the encouragement. But we've got a great team.

Kirt Jacobs: What do you find exciting about all this?

James Ramsey: I find it all exciting. You know I enjoy life and I have my down days there's no question about it. And I can get down and get disappointed but I've been very blessed with a wonderful family. Been very blessed with great health. I enjoy what I do. Most of what I do.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure. At least you're honest.

James Ramsey: So I enjoy my job. I enjoy everything that goes with it from the athletics to the musical performances of our outstanding school of music and our students there and their performances. Our theater arts program and so I enjoy life and so there's a lot of... I found excitement in all of that. There are things I dread and don't want to do but by enlarge. And again I take that

back to Michael Hooker. When Michael died at age 53 I was fifty at the time and I realized that life can be short.

Kirt Jacobs: It can end when you least expect it.

James Ramsey: That's absolutely right. And so work hard do the very best you can enjoy every moment of it.

Kirt Jacobs: What was the best advice ever given to you Dr. Ramsey. And again it can be more than one piece of advice.

James Ramsey: I think just life's not fair.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

James Ramsey: And I've had a number of people I've said this isn't right this isn't fair. And I mean people say who guaranteed you that life was fair. And so we're thrown a lot of curve balls. And sometimes it's family related/ Sometimes it's health related. Sometimes it's professional. There's been a couple of jobs that I've applied for. A couple presidencies that I've applied for and been asked to apply for. Been told you'll get these jobs and I didn't. And so there's no question I was disappointed but I came out of those experiences stronger and better equipped to deal with the future. So what I have learned is that you never know why things happen for the reason that they do. And they do happen for the best. And so I think the best advice I've ever gotten is just you know take what's given to you and do the best you can and things aren't always fair.

Kirt Jacobs: Now this show's called Leadership Landscape. Can you define leadership in one word Dr. Ramsey? Could be more than one in the great English lexicon.

James Ramsey: Well that's a difficult question and leadership means so much to different people but if I tried to use one more I would use the word results.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

James Ramsey: And leaders get things done and they get results. And they found a way to move an organisation. It could be a football team. It could be an orchestra. It could be our symphonic orchestra at the university. It could be a department. It could be a research team but we find... Leaders find ways to make things happen and they found a way to achieve positive results and make things happen for the best.

Kirt Jacobs: OK. I always love this question. If you could change one thing Dr Ramsay be it in your life or in general what would that be? You can interpret that really any way you want nationally, internationally, locally, personally, professionally.

James Ramsey: Well again from a personal perspective you know I've had disappointments and I've made mistakes but you know I've tried to learn from that in so I really wouldn't change anything. And I've been very again blessed family wise professionally. And so forth. One of the things that we're very focused on to university now and we're going to try to change and we're working to change and that is to really improve economic opportunity for the people of our community and state. And we have areas not too far from this studio. That have been left behind economically, socially, and health care. And we've got a lot of people in this community that haven't had the chances in

Kirt Jacobs: OK

James Ramsey: That I've had and haven't had the opportunity that I've had and I think we at the university have a responsibility to our community and so if there's one thing I could change it would be that we at the university and we as a community and I know that this is something the mayor's very committed to is continue to work every day to make this a better place for all of our people.

Kirt Jacobs: OK This next question I like is well. It's kind of a mouthful here we go. Could you describe in detail a particular incident or scenario in your professional or your personal life where you utilized your own style and philosophy on leadership?

James Ramsey: Again the most difficult professional challenge I had was this failure of the General Assembly to pass a budget.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

James Ramsey: And so my approach is teams. Trying... I'm an economist so I believe in division of labor and specialisation. And so I know what my strengths are and I need... And I know what my weaknesses are. So I need to surround myself with people who can cover for my weaknesses and people who have skills that I don't have. And it's just like Rick Pitino and the basketball team he needs a strong point guard, a power forward, and somebody to come off the bench.

Kirt Jacobs: Right

James Ramsey: And organizations are like that. And so with when we didn't have a budget we pulled together that team and we worked on it as a team and we we fretted over it and we agonized over but we we finished with a good result. So that is again that's my leadership style and that's where I approach everything is I value other people's opinions.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

James Ramsey: I value my own instincts but I like to hear have different pair different pairs of eyes look at things. Like have other people advise me on things. I like to have as much information as I can before I make a decision but we have a leadership team at the University of Louisville and all the members of that team are important in formulating policy and and defining what we do as an institution. So the the professional experience is that would typify how I operate would be just sort of day-to-day is just working within a team framework and trying to take advantage of everyone's strengths to really do the very best we can and and we do that every day in what we're doing at the university.

Kirt Jacobs: All right now I want to ask you this question where I'm

going to tell you to leave the leadership team here for a minute. If you were granted two weeks right today Dr Ramsey. No obligation. No commitments. How would you spend what I like to call a two week mini vacation from life? You know you put down the Blackberry. You lock the office door. You can or cannot take family with you. What would you do for those 14 days?

James Ramsey: I'd love to have two weeks uninterrupted with my wife and kids and we could either be on the beach and do nothing and read.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

James Ramsey: I love to read. I love to read a number of books and this job just doesn't give me the time to do that.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure.

James Ramsey: So I could just go off and vegetate but we've been very fortunate as a family to take some really neat trips. And so the other alternative would be to have two weeks to travel and see somewhere that we haven't seen but Jenny is 24. Jackie is 20. Jenny's graduated undergraduate from Auburn now from our nursing school. She's moving on with her life. Jackie's 20 a junior at UL and she's very engaged in campus life. And so your kids grow up so fast and the time with them becomes so important to you and. This is a demanding job.

Kirt Jacobs: I can only imagine.

James Ramsey: Part of the job that I wasn't prepared for Kirt was the part that's 24 hours a day 7 days a week. And that's why you have to schedule your exercise time and family time or it will be consumed. So those moments are precious to me and we just don't get to do enough of that.

Kirt Jacobs: Well this is the question and the last question we ask all of our guests younger or older. Whatever walk of life they come from. Dr Ramsay when the great day comes how do you want

to be remembered? God forbid you walk out of the studio today something tragic happens. How do you want to be remembered? When they look you up in the annals of the history of the university or what have you how he would be remembered?

James Ramsey: Well I would put it a little different.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

James Ramsey: I'd like the most to be remembered as a loving father.

Kirt Jacobs: Great

James Ramsey: Have my daughters look back and remember whatever I've been able to add to their lives. I'd like to be remembered as a good husband. A good son. My dad is still alive. He's 90.

Kirt Jacobs: Wow that's awesome.

James Ramsey: Don't know how much longer you know he'll be with us but.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

James Ramsey: Family is very important. My faith is very important. So I'd like to be remembered as a good Christian. And on the professional things those things sort of come and go. I would like for people to remember me more and not for anything that I was part of and our organization accomplished but more hopefully for the values that I try to represent in terms of honesty, respect for others, integrity, hard work.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a great note to end on Dr. Ramsey. It's quite an honor to have you on Leadership Landscape.

James Ramsey: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Kirt Jacobs: You're doing a lot for the community. Thank you.

James Ramsey: Thank you very much.

Kirt Jacobs: Thank you.

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com