

Joseph Benincasa, President & CEO, The Actors Fund
Excerpts from Commencement Address to Centenary College, 2011
edited/rewritten by Elaine Bennett

I came to this project late in the process, after the client had already completed a draft. It was a pretty good draft, but I saw that it could be even better.

When I asked Mr. Benincasa if I could release this side-by-side comparison of his draft and mine, he replied: "Absolutely. You have my permission (and eternal gratitude)" and added that I "helped turn a sleeper speech into a great speech."

Client's raw material

Elaine Bennett's rewrite

<p>Congratulations to the graduates, your parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, relatives of all sorts, and your friends and colleagues. This is an important day in your lives and a milestone you should cherish.</p>	<p>Congratulations to the graduates, your parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, relatives of all sorts, your friends and colleagues, and all of the teachers and professors you've had throughout your nearly two decades' worth of schooling.</p> <p>But you members of the Class of 2011 may be thinking, "Hey - <u>I'm</u> the one sitting here in the robe and the funny hat. <u>I'm</u> the one getting the diploma. Focus on me!" It's true: This is an important day in your lives. It's a milestone you should cherish.</p> <p>There's no denying that <u>you</u> did the work to earn that diploma. But you didn't do it alone. I'm willing to bet that each of you has a number of significant people in your lives. People who've prepared you to be the person you are today. Who've supported you in your journey - emotionally and intellectually and perhaps even financially. This is an important day in their lives, too.</p>
<p>Today, I'd like to tell you why I think working <u>with</u> people is essential for success...why collaboration is a high art form we should work hard to practice, refining it day-in and day-out.</p>	<p>And that's exactly what I wanted to talk about today: The fact that people working together can always accomplish more than a single person working alone.</p>

	<p>Collaboration is one of the most important skills a person can have. It's so important, in fact, that you've been graded on it since preschool – as in, “plays well with others.” As you embark on your careers – whatever profession or pursuit you choose – you will find that collaborating, working and playing well with others, will be your best and fastest route to excellence.</p>
<p>Team sports like Basketball and Baseball can be great examples of collaboration. Grandparents may remember the 1969/70 New York Knicks led by Willis Reed which seemed to always find the open player to make the basket. And Baseball fans: remember that players like Barry Bonds set records, but the San Francisco Giants won the World Series in 2010, two years after he retired. Great players and great teams are not mutually exclusive, but they do not always go together. Working hard to work together makes the success of every enterprise possible, from the blockbuster movie to [XX <i>university</i>] productions, from great athletic teams to every successful organization, as well as government.</p> <p>I think collaboration is the most winning of ideas. Of course, it helps to have a really big center like Willis Reed and a slugger</p>	<p>If you're a baseball fan like I am, you've probably noticed that the teams that win big are often <u>not</u> the teams with one or two superstar standouts. Barry Bonds hit more homeruns over the course of his career than any baseball player before him. But he never played on a team that won the World Series. The San Francisco Giants didn't win until last year, two years <u>after</u> Bonds retired.</p> <p>Or maybe you're a basketball fan. Your grandparents may remember the great New York Knicks teams of 1969 and 1970. Willis Reed led the team, and no matter how heavy the defensive coverage, he always had a knack of finding an open player to make a basket. That's teamwork.</p>

<p>like Barry Bonds.</p> <p>But collaboration is the key to making things really, really successful, organizationally and personally.</p>	<p>Now, I'm told that not everyone is interested in sports. But I bet you've all visited the Internet. The entire purpose of the Internet in its early days was to facilitate collaboration between research institutions. Back in the 1960s, when computers were far bigger and far less powerful than they are today, one institution's computers might not be capable of handling the complex calculations needed for research – so a network was created to link computers together so researchers could access the computing power they needed.</p> <p>And how did I learn all of that? I learned it thanks to another collaboration that's changed our lives forever – Wikipedia. Wikipedia may be the largest and most far-reaching collaboration the world has ever seen. Whatever topic you're interested in, this remarkable, self-sustaining database gives you access to the collected wisdom of the world. And all you have to do is hit a few keystrokes.</p>
<p>When I was invited to speak with you today, I did what any modern human being would do – I went to the internet and read some terrific commencement addresses – then I went to YouTube and watched some fascinating people deliver</p>	<p>...and that's another benefit of collaboration: You get to meet and work with an amazing range of people.</p> <p>For instance, take this speech I'm giving to you right now. I collaborated on it with speechwriters who've worked with some of the world's greatest orators. I'm talking world leaders, here. And <u>you</u> can collaborate with them, too.</p> <p>That's right: When I was invited to speak with you today, I did what any modern human being would do – I Googled "commencement addresses." And before I knew it, YouTube had served up a range of fascinating people inspiring generations of graduates.</p>

inspiring commencement addresses – and then I called some respected and good friends and asked how they had prepared commencement addresses – I even thought about asking some very literate members of The Actors Fund’s staff to work up something really, really good for me. I think that most of you will understand that with all that reading and watching and thinking and discussing I was, well, intimidated.

My first draft was fantastic, somewhere between President John F. Kennedy at American University in 1962 and Will Ferrell at Harvard in 2003. Both speeches are really terrific, really and profoundly distinct from one another, and I encourage you to read them. I mean, President Kennedy called-out the Soviet Union and outlined a plan for World Peace based on the elimination of nuclear arms and Will Ferrell opened by asking if he was at the Worcester Massachusetts Boat Show.

As a result of this collaboration, my first draft of this speech was fantastic. It was a cross between President John F. Kennedy’s 1963 address at American University – the one in which he challenged the Soviet Union to end the Cold War – and the address given at Harvard 40 years later by another great American, Will Ferrell. Will Ferrell had apparently been expecting to speak at the Worcester Massachusetts Boat Show.

Look up those speeches sometime. They really are terrific.

What did my collaboration with JFK and Will Ferrell teach me? I realized that those speeches succeeded not because of the loftiness of the ideas or the absurdity of the humor. Those speeches succeeded because each man was speaking from his heart about something he passionately believed in.

<p>But instead of recommending a new World Order or trying to make you laugh, I think it's best to tell you what I think is an important, often ignored aspect of good management and, I think, personal happiness.</p>	<p>So rather than emulating the substance of their speeches – recommending a new World Order or trying hard to make you laugh – I decided to focus my remarks on the thing I'm most passionate about, which is collaboration.</p>
<p>...While getting the right people together is essential for organizational success, understanding personal strengths is equally important.</p> <p>We should all know our strengths and appreciate our limitations – doing that equals strength.</p> <p>We all have important roles to play, and several stages to perform on. ... But we should remember that there are no small parts and we are part of something larger than ourselves.</p> <p>I encourage you to play your parts well, with honesty and enthusiasm.</p> <p>Work hard to work with people, not against them.</p>	<p>...You may have a different passion. And that's okay. The most important thing is to be who you are, be true to yourself. Even when you're asked to do something you don't often do...like giving a commencement address.</p> <p>Be honest with yourself about your personal strengths. And, even more important, be honest about your limitations. You can't improve them until you acknowledge them.</p> <p>We all have important roles to play...even if they end up being different roles than the ones we started out pursuing. ...</p> <p>But there's an old saying in the entertainment business, "There are no small parts, only small actors." That holds true in life as well. The important thing is to do something – anything – that you're passionate about.</p> <p>Play your part well, with honesty and enthusiasm.</p> <p>Work <u>with</u> people, not <u>against</u> them.</p>

Take good care of yourself. In so doing, you'll be caring for the ones you love and for those who rely on you.

Believe in something bigger than yourself. This universe is beyond human comprehension and instills in me a wonderful appreciation for its incredible complexity.

Be mindful of your legacy, one which is always a work in progress, remembering that your legacy is tied to the success of your friends and colleagues.

And, always, find joy in what you do, no matter what you do, even if it's alongside someone you're not crazy about.

Take good care of yourself. In so doing, you'll be caring for the ones you love and for those who rely on you.

Believe in something bigger than yourself. It's not all about you. I'm a little sorry to admit this but it's not all about me, either. It's about how we fit together – how we can collaborate to make the world a better place.

The legacy each of us leaves will be tied to the success of our friends and colleagues. So be generous with your talents and your support.

And, always, find joy in what you do, no matter what you do, even if you're working alongside someone you're not crazy about. Collaboration isn't always easy. But it is always the best route.

Congratulations on all you have achieved and good luck as you begin your collaborations in the wider world. I look forward to seeing how your collective talents and energies create a better world for all of us.

[end of speech]