

Lessons from Jimmy Fallon on stepping into leadership

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I haven't seen *The Tonight Show* in years, and my main late-night indulgences are Colbert and Stewart. So I haven't watched much Jimmy Fallon. Except for "[Barack Obama Slow-Jams the News,](#)" which still cracks me up two years later. (The Prezi of the United Stezi!)

But I did catch Jimmy's inaugural monologue on *The Tonight Show* this week, which led me to seek out several other clips. Here's the monologue:

Jimmy Fallon is succeeding a giant of late-night television, and he's entering a crowded field. At 39 years old, he's taking a leap onto a larger stage and needs to prove himself in some ways. As I watched, I was struck by the smart stuff that was going on under the surface, whether calculated or not, and I started to relate Jimmy's debut to other situations leaders find themselves in. (What can I say? It's [what I do.](#))

Leaders sometimes find themselves following beloved leaders, some of whom are older, more experienced, and firmly entrenched in the culture. Or we may find ourselves having to step into a new role thanks to a promotion or other circumstance. How can these transitions succeed?

Here are just a few things that came to mind as I watched Jimmy take the helm. Might some of these relate to you as a leader, or in other roles you play? Some of these would apply not just to leadership, but any new creative endeavor:

1. Locate yourself in history. Fallon made explicit mention of every Tonight Show host (and turned it into a joke by listing "Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien, Jay Leno."). This was a reverent nod to the folks who'd occupied the chair before him, but also a clear statement: *my name belongs on that list now.*

2. Make the role your own, but don't go overboard. The set and format were very similar to the previous incarnation of the show, but with several small tweaks, and a few big ones. For example, Jimmy Fallon brought the show back to New York after many decades in L.A. (Carson started out there but moved the show to California ten years into his tenure.) You've got to find the right balance between continuity and novelty.

3. Mix self-deprecation with really knowing your stuff. As a young woman pastor wanting to be taken seriously, this was always my approach. It would do me no good to demand respect and get strident when I didn't get it. So my approach was to be completely disarming, even self-deprecating, while still projecting extreme competence. The former takes the wind out of the sails of your detractors; the latter ensures they don't write you off. Fallon achieved this balance with his characteristic aw-shucks modesty, coupled with running the show very well and taking his role seriously.

4. Make your family visible. This doesn't apply to every situation, but it was sweet the way Fallon mentioned his wife and daughter and cut to his parents in the audience. Many leaders I meet (especially younger ones) don't want a brick wall of separation between work and family. We want to be integrated. Having your family visible humanizes you. Also, knowing more about you makes people want to root for you.

5. Call in every favor you can. The sheer number of guests and cameos on the first show was dizzying! Check this out:

This isn't just great TV, it's great strategy. Don't go it alone. Calling in favors builds excitement and makes you feel more comfortable too.

6. Spend it all right away. This relates a bit to the previous point. Don't keep good ideas in reserve. Use them immediately, trusting that other ideas will come to take their place. I'm sure there will be other surprises for the rest of this week, and beyond. But taking the previous clip as an example, isn't there something so *abundant* about the way that parade of celebrities came on stage, one after another? Too fun.

Speaking of which:

7. Don't forget to enjoy the moment. Fallon sure looked like he was having a blast, didn't he? I watched the episode mainly for curiosity, but now I want to tune in just to see what he'll do next. (It's one reason why I prefer Colbert to Stewart these days. Nobody looks more tickled to be doing his job than Stephen Colbert.)

8. Keep your goals modest. As leaders, we sometimes have an overinflated sense of what we can accomplish. We have to remember that we're stepping into a system that existed before us and, we hope, will outlast us. Jimmy Fallon made his goals clear: to "take care of this show for a while" and to make his viewers laugh, to send them off to bed with a smile on their faces.

9. Be gracious with your "competition." I put this in quotes because not every leadership role involves competition. But you will notice that Stephen Colbert made an appearance in the clip above. Fallon and Colbert are slotted opposite one another. But having them together is a statement that there is room for both of them.

10. When in doubt, bring on U2. Enough said:

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