

## A Conversation with Dr. Sandy Johnson Senior Vice President of Student Affairs

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

**Luke Auburn:** You're listening to the RIT Professional Development podcast series. I'm your host Luke Auburn. Our guest today is Dr. Sandy Johnson, who joined RIT as Senior Vice President for Student Affairs, in July 2014. She leads a staff of more than 200 people and the university's student life, wellness, student learning, and athletics departments. The office serves RIT's nine colleges and diverse population of more than 15,000 undergraduates and 2,900 graduate students. Before coming to RIT, Dr. Johnson served for nearly eight years as vice president for the Division of Student Affairs at Hofstra University. I'll ask about her career path and her views on professional development. Dr. Johnson, thank you for having us.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thanks for having me.

**Luke Auburn:** So, in general, how do you keep up with the changing demands, styles and attitudes of the students we serve?

**Dr. Johnson:** Well, our students help us do that. You know, I think that, you know, the beauty of working in higher education, especially with students is that every year, there's a new group of students that are coming in. And certainly, they're on the cusps of how they're learning differently, how you know, their attitudes have been shaped and changed by political, economic, social, cultural changes in the world. So they themselves help us to become better at how do we support them in reaching their academic and their personal goals. Of course, there's also a lot of literature out there, there's always research, and you know, that's something that you have to do as a professional in any area. And that's keep up with those trends as to what's being learned through research and other kinds of practices.

**Luke Auburn:** As someone who's had experience in multiple locations, what do you think has been important to your own career success?

**Dr. Johnson:** One of the things I think that has helped me as professional, to grow in every place that I've been, is you know, I think one is, on the personal side, I really love learning, so I'm kind of a forever student, and you know, working in higher ed, you naturally have an environment that supports that. The other part is that you know, along the way, I've had some really great mentors and colleagues as well, that I learned from every single day. You know? So to always be walking into an environment, no matter where you are, no matter what day of the week it is, and saying, "What can I learn today?" You know? "What can I do differently?" or you know, read something. Those are all ways that I think help you grow in your career. And it doesn't mean that everybody wants to be the head of their organization, a VP, a CEO, whatever, you know, because you want to just be in an environment where you're feeling challenged, and you're feeling supported.

**Luke Auburn:** Who have been some examples of your mentors in the past?

**Dr. Johnson:** So I've had both. You know, I've had teachers from classes, I've had, you know, supervisors, certainly. Other times it's been a colleague who's kind of gone off and done other things, and I call them for you know, as a sounding board and a trusted colleague. So, you know, when I think of mentors, it doesn't mean that somebody had to shepherd me through, you know, five years of this or that. It's somebody that you trust in your network, that will be honest with you, usually that has some level of expertise in a particular area. Or really knows you well and will help you kind of sort out some of your thinking. So you know, some of my mentors now have gone on to different kinds of careers. Some have retired, you know, but you maintain a connection to them, because you've learned from them, you know? And what you want to do is you always want to be giving back. You almost feel like an obligation to update them as to what's going on with you. So I think it changes, and I think that that's the beauty of having that good, supportive professional network.

**Luke Auburn:** So, you've been at RIT for about a year now. In terms of professional competencies, what do you think RIT's great strengths are and where can we improve?

**Dr. Johnson:** So I think you know, I mean, that's a big question because if you're talking about, you know, in student affairs, that's one answer. But if I was to look at the University, you know, globally, RIT and you know, this has actually been a great year to come on board as a new person because the institution has just gone through a very major strategic planning process, that's leading where it's going to go in the next ten years. So I've benefitted from all of the work that was done two years prior to this year. And then, you know, how that's also evolving and taking shape. Because a good strategic plan needs to be flexible because things change, you know? That you can't plan for, so certainly I think that we are an institution on the move. I mean, yes, we're 135 years old, but in reality, who we are today has only been since the late 60's. So in that respect, we're very young. And we are very ambitious, and I think that it's exciting to kind of see that passion for growth and that upward trajectory. So that's certainly a strength and you've got people here that are very much committed to that. And they go across all different constituent groups. You know, it's your faculty, it's your staff, it's your alumni, it's community members, you know, it's your leadership here.

So that's a strength because you know, to have an organization that's this size, and the students are on board as well. To have that synergy is unique. You don't always see that. Sometimes it's being driven in only one area. You know, it's being driven by a faculty initiative or it's an administrative focus, but here it's really coming from all of the different pillars. So that's a great strength. I think that we don't tell our story enough. I think we need to get out there, and tell people what's really happening here, you know? And really marketing yourself. I mean, that is what every company needs to do now. You're in a whole other realm of communications, and you know, we're good at that. I mean, there's lots of stuff that goes out. I think you, you know, we're being written up all the time in the local papers and a lot of the trade papers and professional organizations. But we need to shout a little louder, because there's a lot of good stuff going on here.

**Luke Auburn:** What's the best piece of advice someone's ever given you?

**Dr. Johnson:** You know, I can't say I remember a person giving me, "Hey, do this." But you know, I think the pearls that I've learned from people along the way is you know, when you have an opportunity to do something different, like you know, they're asking for volunteers to be on a committee, they're asking for help to do X, Y or Z, that's maybe a little outside of your job scope, but now you've been offered this opportunity, take it. And you know, get everything you can out of that. So that's what's being kind of

presented to you. It's like I've told my kids, I say, "When people ask if they can help, they're doing that because they really want to." So if people are asking you if you want to be involved, they're doing that because they think you have something to contribute, so take advantage of it. And sometimes that might mean letting go of some other things, because you know, it's a longer term advantage to short term, you know, disadvantage, maybe time wise.

The other piece is to seek that information on your own. So, I do remember one of my first supervisors saying, "Well you should go to that faculty lecture" you know? I had no idea what they were talking about. It was a biology professor and I'm like, "Why should I be going to that?" And then I realized after, it was an opportunity for me to be seen, for me to meet people there and then eventually that strengthens your network. So sometimes it's going to different things, that you may not think about, at an institution, because there's a lot going on. I mean, you know, look at what we get on Message Center. I mean, you could fill up your whole day and not do your job, but just attend everything. So be, you know, selective about, "Huh, maybe I won't go to that lecture. Maybe I will, you know, make some time for that."

**Luke Auburn:** And finally, looking now to the future, what skills do you see becoming increasingly important to higher education professionals as the field changes?

**Dr. Johnson:** You know, I think that we as professionals, whether that's in a faculty role or in an administrative support kind of structure, is that you know, you're coming out of programs that have been written, or the scope of the curriculum, it hasn't changed much. You know, higher education is not known for its change management. You know? We as human beings, aren't known to be good about changing, so I think that sometimes, when we think about change, we just skim the surface. We don't really go deep. I think we need to go a little deeper, and we need to learn from other professions, as a profession of higher education. Because one, there's much more government oversight that's coming, you know, more compliance from the government, you know, and that's because I don't think higher ed has told its story well. So when you start to hear the cost of higher education, that's all you hear, but no one's ever taken the perspective of explaining some of that, you know, and some of it is you know, you're a very labor intensive operation so, in most institutions, 84 to 86% of their whole operating budget is labor. You know? And so, you know that's, we have to be more sensitive to some of that, so getting ahead of that, I think. So certainly, the idea of marketing skills, you know, kind of that, getting your message out there, your brand, who you are, is important at every level. Whether you're a faculty

member because you need to make sure you have students wanting to come into your program and so you need to be learning the right language, because Calculus 1 doesn't necessarily make people excited. But, or physics, you know? I remember an institution, a professor said, "I want more people to kind of see physics as fun," so they developed a course called "Physics for Poets". And it was really just taught that it was foundational, but it appealed to a larger audience. And that's about marketing.

**Luke Auburn:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Johnson:** You know? I also think that assessment and using data, understanding data analytics, I mean, you know you talk about "Oh website development". Well, one of the big pieces behind driving that is understanding the analytics behind a website. So you need to be able to look at data and make data driven decisions. One because you'll make smarter decisions, and two, you'll see the gaps of your basic knowledge, you know? So you know, I always say to my staff, "If you're going to do a survey, or any kind of assessment, you need to be prepared to do something with what you find out there. So don't ask questions that you don't have the means in which to give an answer, when you get that data." At the same time, don't be afraid to ask things because you're thinking, "Oh yeah, we're going, everybody's going to say, 'We need five more people'." Because that will give us some of the evidence to support requests and things may take time; it's not a turnkey situation, but you know, don't avoid finding information because you're afraid of what you're going to find. You know, you should actually be excited about what you might find, you know, because sometimes it may surprise you.

**Luke Auburn:** Well Dr. Johnson, thank you very much for your time. That concludes this edition of the RIT professional development podcast series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit [rit.edu/cpd](http://rit.edu/cpd).