

Welcome graduates, family, friends, and faculty. Today is a celebration — of all that you, our graduates, have accomplished, of all the hard work and perseverance that's brought you to this important milestone. I'm tremendously proud as I look out across this stage at the incredible talent and promise assembled here in the class of 2014.

I joined the NYU Law School community about a year ago, and the truly special character of our students is one of the things that drew me here. Since this is my first year as dean, I didn't have the chance to start this journey with all of you, but I'm truly honored to share in its conclusion today.

Graduation is unequivocally a joyful time, but it also *demand*s something of you. It prompts you to pivot the metaphorical looking glass in many directions – you turn it behind you to reflect on your time here, you tilt it forward to contemplate your future, and you focus it on yourself to take stock of who you've become.

I hope that parts of what you see reflected back at you today are the elements of a leader. We at the Law School haven't just been preparing you to be lawyers, although we've surely done that. We have also been preparing you to be the next generation of leaders.

The term leadership is bandied about a lot these days, so much so that it risks losing its currency. I'd like to take a moment to describe what leadership means to me, and what I hope it means for you as you embark on your careers.

When I think of the individuals who have impressed me most as leaders, I think of the shared qualities they possessed: integrity, accountability, vision. But discussion of qualities like that can tend to become abstract and amorphous. So instead of speaking about the attributes that leaders *have*, I'm going to talk about what leaders *do*.

First, the great leaders I've seen in my own life have *listened*. I mean truly listened — to their clients, their colleagues, their staff, the experts, the non-experts. They heard all viewpoints. They empathized with different perspectives and different objectives.

They took time to understand the *needs* of a given situation and to distinguish them from the *expectations*, and to uncover the fundamental issues underlying the rhetoric. You will soon see, if you haven't already, that it is not enough to be the smartest person in the room — you need to be able to *read* the room, to understand the dynamics and the relationships in the room, if you are going to solve a problem or offer real advice. So the first step in leadership is to listen.

The other thing I've noticed is that great leaders are willing to fail. In life we often like to skip over our failures. But that's a mistake. We all fail. The question is what we do next. And what we need to do is to learn from our mistakes. Examining your failure helps you learn what to do—and what not to do—the next time.

Notice that I *don't* say that examining your failure will guarantee you won't fail again. Because that's not true. You *will* fail again. But your strength lies in *how* you fail and what you learn in the process. In the words of Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried, ever failed, no matter. Try again, fail again, fail better.” *Fail better*.

Don't get me wrong. We all have every confidence that you will have careers and lives full of successes. That's been the case up until now, and it will continue. But there will be mistakes as well. Make yourself learn from them, not simply regret them.

This brings me to another, perhaps counter-intuitive, point – A good leader is often dissatisfied. Why? Because a good leader is always striving for improvement. There's an inherent sense of optimism built into this kind of dissatisfaction, because it hinges on the belief that we – that each of *you* – can, in fact, change things for the better. There is

always a gap between what exists today and what could be in the future, both in terms of what we do as a society and in terms of who we are and what we do as individuals. A leader is one who continues to ask about what *could be*.

Now that I've exhorted you to listen, to fail, and to reach, I'll leave you with one final point. *Leadership is a choice*. It is about how you choose to act and what you choose to do, rather than about where you are in your career. All of us can lead — you don't need to be at the head of your organization or hold a particular title. In fact, you may learn the most about leadership in the trenches, and becoming a good leader, like becoming a good lawyer, is a lifelong learning process. So, *lead from where you are*.

As you graduate today, you're leaving NYU Law School with the tools not just to succeed in the world, but to shape it. The study of law is the study of public reason. It is the study of the systems, rules, institutions, and debates governing and framing virtually every issue, every challenge, every problem of importance to humankind. Those issues, those challenges, those problems will be taken up by the next generation of leaders. *You are those leaders*.

Congratulations, and good luck. We'll be following you with great pride and great faith.