

Leading By Example: How We Learn About Leadership

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Paper Presented at the NEIA Annual
Conference, Sun Valley, Idaho,
June 9-13, 2004

Many of you may recall failing to accomplish a task as a youngster and being admonished with the adage, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Reaching adulthood and becoming a leader means that you must now possess much more than mere good intentions. Indeed, according to Warren Benis and Burt Namus, in their excellent book, *Leaders: the Strategies for Taking Charge* (reporting on what leaders do, rather than what leadership is), all true leaders have the ability to translate intention into reality and to sustain it with action and behavior.

LEADERSHIP IS ACTION — NOT WORDS

This ability to translate intention into reality and to act on your intention comes from commitment — a characteristic common to all individuals who are recognized as leaders.

Commitment consists of a set of positive beliefs coupled with an equally appropriate set of positive action and behavior. Without this action and behavior, there is no commitment—merely good intentions. Effective leaders not only say they want to do the "right" thing; they follow through with appropriate actions—they "walk the way they talk."

Leadership, then, is the act of setting the right example, serving as a role model, having actions that speak louder than words, standing up for what you

think is the "right" thing, showing the way, holding to the purpose and espousing the positive beliefs.

HOW DO EXECUTIVES LEARN GOOD AND BAD LEADERSHIP?

In the article, "Personal Histories: Leaders Remember the Moments and People That Shaped Them" (*Harvard Business Review*, December 2001), examples of both good and bad leadership were identified by prominent leaders in business, education and the arts. Each leader had been asked two questions: What person, experience, or work of literature taught you the most about effective leadership? What person or experience taught you the meaning of bad leadership?

It was fascinating to learn from the likes of General Electric's Jack Welch, Disney's Michael Eisner and other notables the reasons they credited certain people with teaching them the principles of good leadership and why they believed certain others showed them examples of bad leadership. The anecdotes shared covered various leadership principles and philosophies; but the ultimate conclusion was apparent: leadership is action — it is about showing, not telling — it is about setting the right example.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Where do Law Enforcement Executives Learn Good and Bad Leadership?

Can law enforcement executives, like those private sector leaders, cite examples of leadership lessons they have learned? Who would these executives credit with good and bad examples?

During the past two years, many law enforcement executives attending

such training programs as the FBI's National Executive Institute, Ohio's Police Executive Leadership College, Wisconsin's Criminal Justice Executive Development Institute, and Washington State's Northwest Executive Command College, have been asked where they learned about good and bad leadership.

Responses were not that surprising, nor did they differ much from those given by the private sector leaders. As expected, in many cases, parents, teachers, coaches, and military and religious leaders have all been credited with teaching these executives the principles of good leadership as well as those unfortunate lessons of bad leadership. Naturally, former chiefs of police, sheriffs, and first line supervisors have also played significant roles in shaping the leadership skills of these law enforcement executives.

Good Leadership Role Models

Law enforcement executives provided a broad range of examples of where they learned principles of good leadership, including family, school, church, military, friends and neighbors, historical figures, and law enforcement officers. The stories you are about to hear are thought-provoking; but most importantly, they leave no doubt that true leaders do lead by example; and their actions do, indeed, influence other people. Their talk does walk!

Family. The following are among many stories told by executives who credited family members with teaching them lessons in good leadership:

"The person who taught me the most about effective leadership was my father. My father owned a furniture store in northwestern Ohio and was very active in the community, volunteering his time with various church ►

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and community organizations. I learned a lot about interpersonal skills from watching him interact with people. Although he was a businessman, he always took the time to get to know people, and not see them as just a source of revenue. He was always the first to set the example for others to follow. One time he was in charge of setting up the Christmas lights downtown. He coordinated with the electric and street departments to make sure the displays were placed just right and had family and other volunteers check to see that every light was working properly. He took the time to pay close attention to detail. He even made sure that all the volunteers' personal needs were met, bringing coffee, hot chocolate (for us kids) and food for everyone. My father's ability to relate to people and his 'striving for perfection and settling for excellence' attitudes are the types of attributes I wish to emulate."

"My mother, although a humble and simple person, did a lot to teach me values, principles, servant leadership and relationship-building with others. Those aspects became fundamental to my own leadership development."

"The single most influential leader in my life was, is, and always will be, my father. After serving in the Army Air Force in World War II, my father became a State Police trooper. At that time, troopers would, on occasion, take their cars home so they could go directly to the field the next day. One such morning I, at the age of six, decided to join my father as a ride-a-long. Unbeknownst to my father, I hid on the floor of the back seat and immediately fell asleep. Later I looked to see my father on duty directing traffic. I sat with my face pressed against the car window watching in awe as he deftly directed all those cars and trucks through that busy intersection. From that moment on, I knew my career path was to follow that of my father's. I also learned the value of discipline on that same day when he discovered me in the back seat."

"My foster son taught me the most about leadership when he stopped a

homeless man who was rooting through the trash. He handed him his sandwich, so that the man could have 'clean food,' because he was probably a good person having a bad day."

"I view my father as a great leader and a man of character. He taught me the value of a good handshake; and that a measure of a person's worth is how much effort that person puts forth, not the position he or she holds. My father always admired people who gave something back. Servitude was a way of life, not an afterthought."

"The event that has had the most impact on me to date has been my wife's near death injuries from a car accident only twenty-two months into our marriage. I was a supervisor at a small lawn care service. I was only twenty-four and had never experienced anything quite that traumatic. I was immature, and the situation caused me to have to grow up. Suddenly my wife's care and treatment was mine to decide on. As her spouse, I was responsible for all decisions regarding her care. Her parents tried to get involved and were told by the hospital that they had no say legally. It was entirely my call. I learned a great deal about myself and how to deal effectively with people. Leadership takes place at home as well as in the workplace. By being forced to a better leader at home, I also became a better leader at work."

School (Teachers and Coaches). The following are among the stories told by leaders who credited teachers and coaches with helping them learn principles of good leadership:

"One of the best leaders I ever encountered was my high school wrestling coach. He could inspire without tearing down self-esteem. His criticisms always accentuated the positive as well as the negative. He would run and practice with us and give individual attention to every team member. This man did not make winning the priority but accepted it as a reward for being the best you could be. He had high integrity and started every meet with a team prayer for strength to do our best and come through without injury. No prayer

ever mentioned winning. He had the interests of the individual at heart but approached it from a team perspective. He never asked for more than he was willing to give himself. Sportsmanship was paramount; and he emphasized that we represented more than ourselves at every competition — we were ambassadors for our school, and our actions directly impacted our reputation. I was a 178-pound heavyweight wrestler, but my competition was always 50 to 100 pounds heavier. The coach taught me the skills and gave me the inspiration to have a 6-win and 4-loss season against overwhelming odds. He led by personal respect as opposed to just being a coach. He taught me the most about leading by example."

"My high school history teacher taught me the most about leadership. He inspired us to study hard and be passionate about government and history. He was also a varsity basketball and baseball coach. He was 5'9" and weighed 300 pounds, but he was still able to show a guard how to shoot a jump shot and a center how to do the drop step. His knowledge of and passion for the classes he taught and concern for his students sold us on learning. He truly led by example and was a real change agent."

"As a young, inexperienced teacher, I had a principal who taught me a lot about leadership. A defining moment was the first time he had to discipline one of my students. He later returned to the classroom and talked privately with the student and me to make sure everything was okay. He never failed at following up after any type of disciplinary action he needed to take. He always showed he cared about the students and the teachers."

"My Babe Ruth baseball coach taught us about leadership. He demanded discipline from each person on the team, but he did so without tearing players down. He would offer us his own money to purchase equipment or attend events, and he gave freely of his own time and advice for the team members. Once, when he was taking several team ➤

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members home from practice, a player was worried about passing his final exam. Coach worked with him and showed him how to study for the test, encouraging him that he could pass it and be whatever he wanted to be in life. He was always positive and supportive with everyone and everything he did with our team. He taught us about baseball but also how to be successful in life.”

Church. The following story is among those told by executives who learned good leadership principles from religious experiences and leaders:

“Jesus is by far the most effective leader I know. He led with a positive example by making himself a servant so all mankind could have salvation. His message was revolutionary; and he remained focused on his goal, which caused him to experience the greatest personal sacrifice—his own life. He took a group of 12 people, and in 3 1/2 years taught them how to send the message to the entire world using three teaching methods: he told them how to do it; he showed them how to do it; then he sent them out to do it.”

Military. Numerous leaders told stories about how their military experiences were invaluable in developing their leadership abilities:

“My experiences in the Marine Corps taught me virtually everything I needed to know about effective leadership. The Corp’s philosophy, ‘you are responsible for everything your men do or fail to do,’ was succinct and complete. The mandated response to failure (‘no excuse sir’) taught me about absolute accountability. The most valuable experience in my life relative to the subject of leadership was my 5-year tour of duty in the U.S.M.C. - period!”

“The person who taught me the most about leadership was a Major in the Marine Corps. His accomplishments in Vietnam and his ability to rise through the ranks merited a great deal of respect. However, the most impressive of his qualities was his ability to deal with people. He was a great teacher; and he took a lot of his personal time to ensure that we had mastered our skills and always provided feedback without being critical. Outside of work, he would have us over for cookouts, treating us as family. This was especially important because we were all a half a world away from home. He would also go out with us while we were in port on deployment and insist that we not call him by his rank, but by his first name. This was hard for young Marines to understand, but he made a point to differentiate between work and play. He was a task master while at work, but he was also a great mentor and role model. To this point in my life, I have never met anyone who had such high standards for personal and professional excellence.”

Friends and Neighbors. Friends and neighbors helped instill leadership principles in many law enforcement executives, as illustrated by the following:

“I come from basically a single parent household. Although my mom was married, my step dad was fairly nonexistent. There was a family across the street that took care of me when my mom worked. They were a very close knit family-loving and hard working—and they genuinely cared for me. The father never yelled, threatened, or showed signs of anger when something went wrong; rather, he emphasized the effect of one’s decisions and actions. He would

always give his support to your decision, even if it was unpopular with others. I learned from this man that leadership is being patient, guiding, calm and confident. But what I learned most about leadership from him and his family is that leadership is about caring even for those who are outside your immediate family.”

“I learned about leadership from an owner of a large, local music store where I worked part-time during my college years. He showed me that leaders lead by example. He always followed the rules he set for employees. He showed that leaders care; he knew all the names of his employees’ family members. He showed me that leaders were never too big to do a job that needed doing. He would even clean the toilets. He also belonged to every civic organization in the community.”

Historical Figures. Some law enforcement executives cited historical figures as their role models for leadership, as exemplified by the following:

“My most insightful leadership lesson came from learning about people who had a vision for what needed to be accomplished. These people were able to articulate the reason and strategy to meet the vision and inspire others to follow it. Martin Luther King was a leader who never wavered from his vision, stayed focused and refused to be distracted by impediments. He developed and influenced others to be leaders to carry out his vision.”

“The civil rights movement of the 1960s had numerous exceptional leaders. These individuals developed and implemented a plan to achieve equality for all Americans. Just as many lives were lost during the Civil and the ➤

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Revolutionary Wars, lives were lost in the civil rights campaign. This movement taught me the importance of strategic planning, communications, restraint, patience and compassion."

"I have studied Civil War history very carefully, focusing particularly on General Stonewall Jackson's leadership. He was probably the most effective general of the war because of his focus, vision, dedication to his men and ability to win the trust and respect of his troops. He never allowed his troops to think in terms of failure; rather, he made them believe they were capable of seemingly impossible accomplishments. He truly led by example."

"I have learned the most about leadership by studying the personal and professional life of Abraham Lincoln. I have over 30 interesting, valuable books on Lincoln. Lincoln's perseverance, compassion and ability to provide clarity to a situation were probably the most valuable of his leadership traits. I particularly like his quote, 'I must confess that I have not controlled events, but plainly events have controlled me.' After studying Lincoln, one realizes that how one responds to events (sometimes not of one's own creation) is what matters. I will continue to read about Lincoln as long as I live."

"General George C. Marshall taught me the value of patience, consultation, hard work, and thinking through issues and problems with your staff. Above all, he taught me humility and modesty at the moment of one's greatest triumph."

Law Enforcement Officers. Not surprisingly, former chiefs, sheriffs, mid-managers and first line supervisors have been credited with helping to shape countless law enforcement leaders, as illustrated by the following:

"My first supervisor as a police officer was the epitome of leadership. He was a military man who exuded command presence. He was incredibly articulate and had a wit to match. He was uncompromisingly ethical. Everyone knew that he stood for right and nothing less. He gathered all his subordi-

nates together and met us for lunch every single day. We discussed the intricacies of our individual cases and operations, plus anything personal we cared to share. This guy-this leader-cared as much about the people as he did about the work product. He brought out the best in every one of us. Many of us are now in leading positions in organizations and enterprises because of him."

"Although I have learned a great deal about leadership from books, seminars, and movies, I learned the most from a lieutenant I worked for. Working with this man was every patrolman's dream. He was a man of character, dignity, integrity, and courage, who was dependable, knowledgeable and calm under pressure. He always led by example, supported his officers and their decisions, and treated people fairly and equitably. He was not afraid to discipline when it was warranted; but he always did it in a manner that was constructive and that made you feel bad for disappointing him. Not once did I see him lose his temper, exhibit egotism, talk behind someone's back, criticize anyone in public, make a promise that he didn't keep, or do anything to compromise his values and principles or discredit his character. I always felt that I worked 'with' and not 'for' him. I am a better person, and the police department is a better place because this lieutenant served with us. To this day, I would walk into the depths of hell carrying only a bucket of water, if he was by my side. I am proud to have served with him."

"The person who taught me the most about leadership was my lieutenant in narcotics. She empowered us to learn and get the job done safely and effectively. When discipline was needed, she did it swiftly and fairly, and then built us back up, instilling a lesson. She showed us she had great confidence in us and constantly encouraged teamwork. When things went wrong, she was there to step in and assume full responsibility. She was always available for a personal conversation and would put aside whatever she was doing to listen."

"I was the deputy operations commander at the scene of a landslide where 20 people were killed in a ski lodge. The scene that greeted me (8 hours after the landslide) was catastrophic-uncoordinated search and rescue efforts, frantic relatives looking for loved ones and sub-zero temperatures. I asked the operations commander who was surveying the scene with me where we should begin. He commented, 'I am not sure either, but let's begin here.' In saying these words, he bent over and symbolically picked up a rock. The lessons I learned from him were patience, planning, stoicism and, above all, true leadership. We all knew (from the most junior officer there) who was in charge. Things were done through our respect for him."

Bad Leadership Influences

Law enforcement executives have also reported learning effective leadership the worst way possible-by experiencing bad leadership and vowing that they will never conduct themselves in a like manner. Several leaders defined bad leadership from their own experiences:

"Bad leadership: Every person in a position of authority who: 1) placed his or her comfort, needs or desires above those he or she was charged with leading; 2) violated the trust given to him by trusting people; 3) violated the Golden Rule of treating others as he or she would want to be treated; and 4) when confronted by adversity took the coward's path rather than the courageous path."

"There have been so many that have taught me about bad leadership: the bosses and co-workers who ignore the civilities of a 'hello' when riding in the elevator or passing in the corridors; those who continue to do their own work while pretending to listen to you; those who fail to say 'thank you,' 'good job,' or other little things that mean so much; or those bosses who allow employees to behave rudely and aggressively, perhaps because they are unaware that they do the same and set the

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example. Their names pass, their words are forgotten, but the impact of their actions linger like an insidious virus-sapping energy, swallowing motivation, stamping out pride. These are the individuals who fail truly to understand that sometimes it is far better to be kind than right."

"Examples of bad leadership that I have experienced include bosses yelling at subordinates, trying to lead through fear and intimidation; supervisors treating people differently than they themselves would like to be treated; and supervisors with double standards, who think of themselves first and their subordinates second."

LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED

It is clear from the stories and experiences shared by law enforcement executives that leadership is everyone's business. Those who have set the example for others to grow and develop are perhaps the true leaders. These influential people come from all walks of life—they are found in families, schools, churches, among neighbors, and in the workplace. Leadership is not about a position, place, title or rank. Leadership is about an attitude and a sense of responsibility for making a difference.

Leadership begins with a choice. The issue is not whether you will influence people; but rather, what kind of influencer you will be—what you will influence them to do. Each of us has a choice: we can get involved, to make a difference; to help members of our family, our community, and our organizations become leaders—to help them become all they are capable of being. It is our choice: to make a difference by influencing others.

Are You Demonstrating Good or Bad Leadership?

Are you making a difference? Would you be an example for good or bad leadership? Can you find in yourself the good leadership characteristics and attributes that were identified in the stories?

Are you:

- Worthy of trust, honest, a person of integrity?
- Caring, compassionate, respectful?
- Willing to lead by example?
- Inspiring, uplifting, enthusiastic, positive?
- Competent, capable, effective?
- Forward looking, with a sense of direction, a concern for the future?
- A good listener and communicator?
- Humble?
- Accessible to the people?
- Patient and kind?
- A decisive problem solver?

Or Are You:

- Rude or aggressive?
- Leading by fear and intimidation?
- Operating with double standards?
- Putting yourself first over your employees?
- Uncaring?
- Demeaning; disciplining employees in front of others?
- Micro-managing?
- Being untrustworthy?
- Violating the Golden Rule?

If Attitudes and Actions Were Contagious, Would You Want to Catch Yours?

There is nothing new in any of these findings on good and bad leadership. The stories are important, however, because they keep bringing us back, time after time, to the old, simple principles that we are all so anxious not to see. We need to be reminded that instead of mirroring those around us, we must set the example. Our actions send signals about who we are and what we expect of others. For the ultimate test as to whether you are making a difference, try asking yourself this question: If attitudes and actions were contagious, would you want to catch yours?

Who Has Made a Difference in Your Life?

The late cartoonist, Charles Schultz, suggested the following exercise to help identify those people who have made a difference in your life:

- List a few teachers who aided your journey through school;
- Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time;
- Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile;
- Think of a few people who have made you feel appreciated and special;
- Think of five people you enjoy spending time with; and
- Name half a dozen historical figures whose stories have inspired you.

When you finish this exercise, you will no doubt conclude—as did Schultz—that the people who truly make a difference in one's life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones who have simply shown that they care about other people.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is about setting the right example and making a difference in people's lives. You do not have to do great things to make a difference. The small choices and decisions we make one hundred times a day add up to determining the kind of family, workplace and community we live in. The examples of good and bad leadership are important learning lessons for all of us. Their lessons, at the very least, should make every leader pause, reflect, and ask: "What message am I sending? What environment am I creating? What example am I setting?"

Everything a law enforcement executive does and does not do says something about what is important to him or her—as a leader. Make it your daily mission to set the example, to make a positive difference in someone's life every day. □

Reprinted from the NEIA website: www.neiassociates.org.

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