

Introduction

My first assignment in graduate school was to read a portion of one of Shakespeare's histories and write on the leadership insights I gleaned from it. I remember the settled feeling that came over me with the confirmation of a long held suspicion. Leadership lessons are everywhere: Shakespeare, movies, pop culture, sports, work, school and family.

Everyday encounters—rich in frustration, investment, humor, opportunity and reward—offer a refining crucible for our leadership. I spend a large portion of my work life as an executive coach, and though executive leadership is the domain of a select few, opportunities to lead at local levels are virtually endless regardless of title or position in life. Further, the consequences of leadership in those more everyday places are of no less import. In that sense, leadership is leadership. Although its applications differ, its values endure. Good leadership attributes and their corresponding behaviors are the same in every milieu.

I have had the privilege of interacting with leaders in dozens of Fortune 500 companies; I have read scores of leadership books; I have held leadership positions, and I have earned a graduate degree in leadership. All of these things have informed my knowledge and views of what leadership is and does, but none eclipse what I have gleaned about leadership from my everyday life, at home, with my wife and my two children. The lessons I have learned from my triumphs and mistakes at home have formed the basis not only for my own practice of leadership, but for my understanding of it and for my counsel to others on it also.

The following pages recount stories from everyday life in my family over a period of nearly 3 years. I have purposely kept them informal and arranged them somewhat randomly, as they are meant, for the most part, to stand alone. After each, I have fashioned questions I hope will provoke further consideration of how you might understand both your leadership and your everyday differently.

1 Initiative

I was out of town on business. While I was away, my wife made a passing remark about our lawn needing to be mowed. In response, my 8 year old son offered to mow it. So my wife started the lawnmower for him and set him loose.

Press pause. There's a good leadership lesson—let 'em try it! But I digress...

When I arrived home, I realized it had been done, but not by whom. I assumed that my wife had acquiesced to one of the 12 year old entrepreneurs who frequent our neighborhood with their advertisements for lawn care. Not long after I entered the house, I learned who had, in fact, done it.

I also learned what the expected rate for such service is.

"Between 4 and 6 bucks," my son reasoned.

Now, our lawn is reasonably sized, and would warrant significantly more than that from another service provider. In soliciting the views of some of my friends in passing, I received some wise counsel: let him feel like he has negotiated well. I asked him, "How much do you think it is worth?"

Again, "Between 4 and 6 bucks."

"How much would you charge someone else for that work?"

He thought for a moment, then responded, "10; 5 for the

front and 5 for the back.”

“Deal,” I agreed.

He felt like he’d negotiated well; he was proud of his effort and the money he’d earned.

I, however, was proud of his initiative.

Your Leadership Story

Whose initiative have you noticed lately?

How could you encourage or reward this initiative?

2 When to Get Out of the Way

My son and I were returning home from a long walk with our dog. A car headed toward us slowed, and finally stopped. Its driver leaned out of the open window and asked, "Do you know where Shady Lane is?"

"Hmm..." I thought aloud. "I know it's nearby, but I'm not sure where."

"Turn around; go back to Stoddard, and turn right. After that, it's the first street," interjected the voice of my not yet 8 year old son.

The driver looked at me, questioning.

"He's right," I remembered.

"Thank you," he looked at me, then corrected himself.

"Thank you!" he said to my son before driving off.

"Good thing I remembered where Shady Lane is," my son said.

"Yeah, nice job," I replied.

My son doesn't know how to drive. We barely let him go a few blocks away on his bicycle. He's never had any training on reading a map, nor does he know anyone who lives on Shady Lane.

But that isn't the point. The point is that he knows where it is. He isn't supposed to know, and it doesn't matter how he knows, or how he remembered, just that he knows.

When that happens, a good leader has only one response:
get out of the way and let the expert do the talking.

Your Leadership Story

To what extent are you willing to submit to the expertise of
your followers?

What is your response when one of your followers knows
more than you do? Celebration? Disappointment?
Encouragement? Embarrassment?

3 First Things First

I rose early on Sunday and dressed for a run. I asked my daughter, who had also risen early, to walk the dog. She agreed, but as she was preparing to do so, I heard a whisper in my conscience: "Go with her."

I fought it at first—I wanted to start my run—but I found myself realizing that running, in this moment, would have been a selfish decision.

"If you wait just a second, I'll go with you," I said.

"OK," she smiled brightly.

It was simple; we went for a short walk with the dog, just up and down our street. We talked and laughed. The whole thing probably took 10 minutes.

When we came back inside, she proposed the idea to make breakfast for the rest of the family, who were still in bed.

"OK," I said. (When a 9 year old is eager to make her 7 year old brother breakfast in bed, you take it.)

We made breakfast together. She even took the coffee grinder to the outside porch to ensure its noise didn't awaken anyone. She wrote encouraging notes to put on the breakfast trays.

We delivered the breakfasts together and enjoyed the surprised and grateful responses. I encouraged her and thanked her for the great idea.

And *then* I went running—not as long as I’d planned to—but happier than I would have been otherwise.

Your Leadership Story

Who needs time with you? What personal interest might you need to delay or sacrifice on behalf of others?

What one thing in your life needs to be first, but currently isn’t?

4 Doing Things Right Gets You...

~~Recognition Ignored.~~

Unfortunately, most leaders tend to focus on what's wrong, or who's wrong, not on what's right, or who is doing the right things.

Yesterday I took my daughter to a local coffee establishment for a hot chocolate. I wanted to talk to her, and encourage her. You see, she is the kind of kid who does a lot of things right. She does her homework conscientiously, doesn't get in trouble at school, and tries to help other kids obey the rules.

But what she sees in her classroom, and sometimes in her home, makes her feel unappreciated. She often hears lectures about things that she didn't have anything to do with, and endures punishments designed for other kids but meted out on the entire class.

With this in mind, I said to her, "I know it's hard sometimes to do things right even when other people aren't. I really appreciate it, though, that you keep doing things right even though it's difficult, or even when other people keep getting attention for the wrong reasons."

True to form, she said, "Yeah, sometimes," but immediately started talking about something else. It just wasn't that big a deal to her. She does the right things because that's who she is.

As her Dad and as a leader, though, I have to make sure she knows I'm proud of her for that, and that I notice. A cup of hot chocolate and a few encouraging words are a small price to pay for assurance that she does.

Your Leadership Story

What percentage of your time do you spend with those who are doing things right compared to those who are getting into some trouble?

What message does this ratio send to those who are doing things right, and how can you reinforce it, or change it if necessary?

5 Who Are Your Followers?

Followership is an often overlooked, but essential, part of leadership.

Leaders gain the “right” to lead from only one source: their followers. Interestingly, though, too often we fail to identify who our followers are, or assume we have more, or fewer, than we actually do.

My son is learning this as he considers how to lead at school.

Today, we were talking about how his actions at school, whether positive or negative, influence others.

His take on followership was an interesting one: “Most of my followers are in a different classroom, so they don’t notice what I’m doing.”

He, like many other leaders, underestimates both the scope of his influence and the number of his followers. (Which, incidentally, is perhaps better than overestimating...)

My role in the situation was to invite him, and his leadership, into a larger world and into a greater understanding.

Not everyone who follows us is overt. Some people will view us as leaders and we will never know it. Others will know our names even though we do not know them.

My ongoing challenge to my son is the same as the challenge all leaders face: live like a leader all the time, not

just when you are certain your “followers” are watching.

After my son and I had the talk about influencing people either positively or negatively, he expressed a frustration to me: “These 4 other boys in my class just keep following me!”

“That’s a tremendous compliment to you,” I said.

He was still frustrated. “If they like you and want to be around you,” I continued, “then you have a great opportunity to lead them in a positive direction, just like we have discussed.”

He nodded.

“I believe in you, and I think you can be a great example to these other boys. Your teacher told me that you are one of the positive leaders in your class, and I am very proud of you for that. If people are following you, make sure you are setting a great example for them. I know you can do it,” I concluded.

They keep following... Having influence, being a leader, doesn’t turn on and off, nor does it go away when we’d like a bit more privacy or a more convenient time. It is a curse in that we must be “always on,” but it is also a significant blessing because it creates instant accountability; it keeps us humble when we fail; it forces us to examine ourselves and apologize when necessary (often publicly); and, perhaps most of all, invites intentionality.

They keep following... Where will we take them?

Your Leadership Story

How can you be more aware of who chooses to follow you?

Do you have a clear direction and intent for your followers?

About the Author



Stosh D. Walsh serves others as a coach, consultant and speaker throughout North America and Europe. His past clients include

Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Ann Inc., US Bank, McKinsey and Company, Banana Republic, Northrop Grumman, Kohler and the United States Federal Government. He has an undergraduate degree in Education and a Master's degree in Leadership. Stosh's outside interests include photography and hiking. He lives in Chicago's western suburbs with his wife, Tammy, and their two children. This is his first book.

Stosh welcomes the opportunity to interact with readers via the following outlets:

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