

The Transforming Power of Leading by Example: Five Lessons from the Classroom

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Little did I know that one of the most profound learning experiences of my life would occur during the spring quarter of 1994. The quarter started out inauspiciously when I received a call from an assistant coach of the university's men's basketball team telling me that one of the players, who was signed up for my labor relations course, would miss the first two classes because of the team's schedule. "Great!" I thought to myself. "This student is going to be just like student-athletes I'd heard so many horror stories about." Rumor had it that athletes often were encouraged to enroll in classes taught by doctoral students because they were more vulnerable than professors and thus more susceptible to pressure to give special favors to the athletes or give undeserved grades so the athletes could stay on their respective teams. I anticipated a long and difficult quarter. As it turned out, I couldn't have been more wrong about an extraordinary student-athlete named Travis.

When Travis arrived at the third class meeting, his classmates had lots of questions about the basketball "star" in their midst. When asked whether he planned to leave school early to enter the NBA draft, he replied, "Before my Mom died I promised her I would finish college. My graduation date is December 10th at 1 p.m." You could have heard a pin drop in the room.

Throughout the rest of the quarter, Travis set the bar for his classmates - and they responded eagerly. On a day when the students were scheduled to participate in a role play of an arbitration hearing, I was astonished to see them dressed in business attire instead of their usual jeans and t-shirts. "Travis told us we have to take this exercise seriously and dress professionally, so we did," they told me. At the end of the quarter, all but one student had earned an A in the course, an unprecedented outcome. Travis had set the bar that high, and everyone rose to the challenge.

The end of the quarter held one more lesson for me. When I submitted my grades, the director of my program questioned their accuracy. He was sure I had made a mistake in recording the grades. When I told him about the extraordinary performance I had witnessed during the quarter, he shook his head and asked me to consider lowering some of the grades. His reason was that if I "gave" such high grades and my course evaluations were good, college administrators would conclude that I had "bought" the good evaluations by giving high grades. I declined his invitation to change the students' grades.

Here are the five lessons I learned that quarter from Travis:

1. It's important to treat people as individuals and expect the best of them.

When I got the phone call from the coach, I had no evidence that Travis would be anything other than an exemplary student, yet based on stories of my colleagues' experiences, I expected

the worst. I never expected a leader who would transform the learning experience in my classroom. Fortunately for all of us, Travis did not live down to my initial expectations.

2. Specific goals provide powerful motivation.

When Travis stated the commitment he had made to his mother, he named the exact date and time of his graduation. This laser-like focus enabled him to resist the allure of turning professional and inspired his classmates to set and achieve their own challenging goals.

3. Set clear and high expectations and people will do their best to meet them.

Simply speaking, Travis set high standards for himself and worked hard to meet them. Inspired and motivated by his example, his classmates chose to follow his lead.

4. People follow willingly those who lead by example.

Travis didn't just tell his classmates what to do, he showed them. He never let his participation on the basketball team serve as an obstacle to performing to the best of his ability in the classroom. Admiring Travis' firm commitment to achieving his goal, the other students changed their own behavior to emulate his.

5. It is critical to reward desired behavior even when there is pressure to do otherwise.

The grading standards for my class were set in advance and communicated clearly in the syllabus. Because the students met the stated criteria, they had earned their high grades. To arbitrarily lower their grades would have been unethical - not to mention de-motivating.

These lessons are just as applicable to the workplace as they are to the classroom. The transformation of students' behavior and results that I witnessed could just as easily have occurred in the workplace. Imagine what **your** work environment would be like if you expected the best from your employees and co-workers, even those who have struggled in the past. How can **your** organization benefit from taking these lessons to heart? ➔

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