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# Lessons in Everyday Leadership\*

Kit Boesch

In the early 1970's, I was one of the youngest coaches in The Ohio State University Athletic Department. It was October 1972 when I took 26 women on the OSU Track team to compete in South Carolina. It is a night I won't ever forget. After the competition we walked into a restaurant for dinner at 6:30pm. Most of us had eaten when we walked out at 7:00 P.M. without paying the bill—because they refused to serve my Black athletes. Three important things happened that night. First, I received instant respect from my track team that night and for many years to come. Second—I almost lost my job. And third—I learned a very valuable lesson: not everyone believed the same way I did or had the same values. It was one of many lessons I have learned—and am still learning—on my journey.

Dr. Marilyn Grady invited me to write for the *Journal of Women Educational Leadership*. While honored, I realized I don't do research on leadership. I don't lecture on leadership or have files on leadership. But then I thought—maybe that's the whole point. Most of us don't. Most of us get up every morning and do what we are supposed to do; when and wherever we are supposed to do it. It's not rocket science or Mission Impossible. Rather it's everyday leadership. *It's the kind of leadership you learn when you don't expect it—and the kind of lessons you teach when you don't even know you are doing it.* And make no mistake—it is very powerful.

In an effort to write something “new and valuable” I, of course, immediately ran to the Internet and used the search engine Google using the term “leadership traits;” 20,000 hits came up all telling me the same thing. Leaders are visionary, intelligent, honest, competent, and inspiring. These characteristics describe 98% of the women reading this journal! Next, I decided to examine women leaders we all know and admire. I thought of leaders like Alice Paul, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, Barbara Jordan, Helen Boosalis, and Shirley Chisholm, to name a few. I realized these were women just like you and me. They didn't get up in the morning and say, “I am going to change the world.” I do not believe for one second, Rosa Parks got up saying—“Today I think I will significantly impact the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.” They were women of great convictions and strong values. They were groundbreakers who believed in themselves, and the fact that right was right and wrong was wrong.

So I asked myself, what would any of these women have done today? I

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## About the Author

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believe today they would still be making a difference—but they would have to exhibit a little different style of leadership—because the times have changed. Being visionary, intelligent, honest, competent and inspiring are still laudable leadership traits, but they are not enough. Today, chaining yourself to City Hall or walking out of a restaurant leaving a bill may not yield the same results. Here are some of the lessons I have learned.

### Lesson #1

**Today it isn't enough to be visionary. Women need to recognize shared vision is more powerful than simply having your own vision.**

Women have a tendency to love our own visions. We love our ideas and our successes. We guard them like mother bears protect their cubs. The truth is, that unless we begin making a concerted effort to share our visions, we will limit our own potential. Leslie Dillon, in the *Leaders Digest* (January 2009), says “Being forward looking—envisioning exciting possibilities and enlisting others in a shared view of the future—is the attribute that most distinguishes leaders from non-leaders.” Here is one example.

Dr. Greg Mortenson, Nobel Peace Prize winner and author of *Three Cups of Tea* is credited with building schools throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was appalled at the learning conditions of children and even more shocked that only boys were allowed to receive an education. His vision was to build a real school where boys AND girls could learn. He had spent over a year raising money in the U.S., buying materials, and developing blueprints for his first school in Korfay, Pakistan. He arrived ready to build, only needing the village people to assist him with the manpower. No one came. He didn't understand. He had it all figured out—what the school would look like, what it would be made of and where it would be located. . . . and nobody came. Then the village chief said to him, “Dr. Greg, if you want to see a school built you must sit down and shut up!” It appears there were different expectations of the villagers about what a school looked like, how it was constructed, and a place of honor in which it must be built. Dr. Mortenson said, “once it was a shared vision and not HIS vision, the school

was built rapidly. Today literally hundreds of children have been able to get an education in the village of Korfay.

Today boys “and girls” are learning because Dr. Greg shared his vision.

## **Lesson #2**

**Women are intelligent, but today, to be truly effective, we must be more perceptive. Let me give you an example.**

It is important to recognize the difference between power and influence. Influence gives you power. Power only makes people afraid of you. Many people have power: mayors, governors, judges, principals, police officers, tenure committees, and department chairs. They can make laws, put people in jail, take their homes, fire you from your jobs, or give you tenure. Anyone can have power if she has a title and a position. I learned this from Susan Gorley, Superintendent of Lincoln Public Schools. While sitting in her office about two months ago, I was admiring her awards and honors. She smiled and said perceptively, “you know, I only received these because I am Superintendent. When I retire next year I will not get any more awards. Nor will I be invited to fancy country club dinners or important financial meetings with city advisors.” It was a most perceptive observation.

Shortly after I arrived in Lincoln in 1980, I had the privilege to direct the Lincoln Lancaster Commission on the Status of Women. As a government office, we had recognition, but we also had parameters. Women in the community wanted discussions on challenging issues like pro-choice and pro-life and equal pay for equal work. These were not always comfortable topics and clearly were not always in the best interests of government. City departments also had fixed budgets and ours was small. While intelligent enough to know the importance of being recognized by government, one also needed to be perceptive enough to know if you wanted real change it was not going to happen there. Friends of the Commission was born. This was a separate 501c3 non-profit agency that had none of the restrictions of local government. One year we raised almost as much as the city budget allocated! It was a way to make change happen—while still allowing government to recognize the importance of women in our society.

## **Lesson #3**

**We need to be more creative in getting to “right.” We also need to empower the young women around us, and the men who support us, in the process.**

One year at Ohio State, I was informed that my track meet on Saturday could not begin until 1:30 P.M. instead of 8 A.M. because Woody Hayes, legendary football coach who was revered just below God, wanted to practice. Aside from the facts that the meet had been scheduled a year in advance, it was the Big Ten Championship for Women, and Coach Hayes had another practice field just north of the stadium, it was just plain wrong. My normal

demeanor was to rant and rave and declare injustice, but knowing how Coach Hayes was revered that would have been a waste of time. Instead, I subtly suggested to 30 women on the track team that they might want to contact at least five relatives and, if they did not think this was fair, give the President of the University a call and say so (by midnight tonight). I had his home phone number posted behind me. I understand the number received more than 100 calls by midnight when he took the phone off the hook. When I informed the women we had the track that Saturday at 8 A.M., they were ecstatic with joy. When I told them it had happened because of them, I truly believe they walked out of the locker room a foot taller than when they came in. *We need to empower the women around us and the men who support us. We need to be more creative in getting to "right."*

#### **Lesson #4**

**While competence is important; I believe RESPECT is equally as great an attribute.**

In Eleanor Roosevelt's biography, Blanche Wiesen Cook notes, "she could walk into a room with hundreds of people she had never met, talk to you, and at that moment make you feel like you were the most important person in the world." Gus Lee, at the Center for Creative Leadership and author of the book, *Courage*, said, "Respect is essential for effective leadership. Without respect leaders cannot lead and managers cannot manage." It is easy for us to give respect to people we believe have earned it. Many times we use titles, The Honorary . . . ; Chief . . . Mayor . . . This comes naturally to many of us. But giving respect, when we don't want to, is a learned skill. The poem, *Spiral Descending* by Debra Burns Melican, illustrates my point:

**Spiral Descending\*\*  
by Debra Burns Melican**

How proud she was of her son, her husband, her life.

How she worked to build a home.  
The smell of baking cookies permeating the air.  
Fresh sheets on the beds.  
Clean towels in the bathroom.  
A twinkle in her eye. Joy on her face.

The son married and moved away.  
Far away.

The husband left, too.

\*\*Permission to use the poem, "Spiral Descending" (1987) granted by: Debra Burns Melican, Ph.D., Assistant Visiting Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago.

At first she was merely lonely.  
 At first she sought employment.  
 No one hired the skills of a lifetime:  
 motherhood and homemaking.

She sold the house to pay for the surgery.  
 She found an apartment,  
 but when the rent went up,  
 she moved on.

To a room. In an old hotel.  
 Not clean like her home.  
 But not too bad.  
 Except for the hallways.  
 Except for the stairs.  
 Except she was afraid.

The hotel had to come down for offices.  
 She didn't have much anymore.  
 It easily fit in a bag.

I saw her the other day.  
 You often see her, too,  
 we usually look away politely.

*Respecting everyone means all women, not just those with titles and letters after their names. For effective leaders there can be no looking down or away.*

## **Lesson # 5**

**It isn't enough to be "inspiring" when the urge hits us or when we are called upon to give a lecture or speak to a class. We must use the talents God gave us every single day.**

In 1968, one of the smallest nations in the world, Rhodesia, was banned from the 19th Olympiad in Mexico City. In his book, *Wilderness of Spite*, Dr. John Cheffers, Boston University, describes Rhodesia as a pawn in the international game of political chess. He ought to know as he was to have been the National Track and Field Coach for those Games. I had the opportunity to share dinner with him one evening and after many tales of the plight of a nation I could only begin to envision, I told him I thought he was one of the most inspiring men I had ever met. He laughed and said, "Kit, there is nothing inspiring about me. In fact, there is one thing that scares me to death. . . ." (this from a man who was an Olympic Coach, an internationally renowned mathematician, an author, weighed easily over 300 pounds and had just finished the biggest steak I have ever seen!). I wanted to know what scared him because I knew it would scare me too! He said his greatest fear was that he would wake up one morning and realize

he had not used the talents God gave him, to the best of his ability, the way God wants him to.

Everyone reading this article has talents. Many in this audience are leaders. You can read, write, teach, research, sing, build, cook, or a multitude of other things. Being inspiring every day is what preachers and people who raise money must do. It is a great attribute but one which makes me tired just thinking about it. We must dig into our pockets and use the God-given talents we own every single day. That is a requirement of effective, everyday leadership.

Shirley McClaine said “I was not a soldier or a philosopher or a politician. I could cure no disease; solve no problems or lead a revolution. But I could dance. And I could sing. And I could make people laugh and I could make people cry. From that moment on I realized my life had changed!”

Leaders are indeed honest, visionary, intelligent, competent and inspiring. But everyday leadership requires more than that. It requires having creative courage and shared vision; being perceptive, respectful, and talent-driven. *Everyday Leadership: the kind of leadership you learn when you least expect it; the kind of lessons you share when you don't even know you are doing it.*

It was 10:30 P.M. on a Tuesday night when I got a call at home from a young man named Nick. He apologized for the hour. He was in California and had forgotten the time change. He said he just wanted to call to say thank you. Not recognizing the name I waited for more. Nick said when he was a sophomore at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, he realized he was gay. It terrified him. He said he couldn't tell any of his friends or his family. He woke every day afraid of what the day might bring if someone found out. Then he heard about the Lincoln Fencing Club; a club where they learned to swordfight. He heard there were gay fencers there and it was a safe place to go. So he came over to see if it was a safe place. When he got there he realized nobody cared whether he was gay or straight! All they cared about was did he practice hard, and do footwork and take lessons. He found himself waking up in the morning waiting to go to club. He said for the first time, he woke up and wasn't afraid. For the first time he woke up and didn't think about whether or not he had the courage to kill himself. . . . and he just wanted to call and say thank you for that. I thanked Nick for the call. I told him it meant a great deal to me and wished him well in his California adventures. To be honest, I don't remember who Nick was.

Everyday Leadership: the kind of leadership you learn when you least expect it; the kind of lessons you share when you don't even know you are doing it. Everyday Leadership is a life long journey. Everyday Leadership is very powerful.