

## The Life of Business and the Business of Life

There are 250 books on leadership written every year. It's a pretty popular topic. I've read a lot of them, particularly by those CEOs who have made it big and whom I personally admire, such as Jack Welch and Larry Bossidy. As a former CEO of a large multinational company, I've learned much from them.

I also read books by educators such as Warren Bennis, Peter Drucker, and Noel Tichy. Their writings, in the main, are directed to the Old Guys like myself, or better put, Old Guys writing to Old Guys.

The challenge I've always faced with relating the wisdom of these well-known leadership practitioners to my twenty- and thirty-something MBA students is that their lessons really don't apply to my students' present situations. That's what made me decide to write a book for both twenty- and thirty-somethings and forty- to sixty-somethings on achieving a leader's role and how contemporary leaders deal with the issues of leading.

My son Jonathon and I wrote the book THE 100-MILE WALK to expose the insights, the demeanor, the personality, and the character traits of people who are admired by their people as leaders. I view them not simply through my senior corporate CEO eyes, but through the eyes of my inquisitive MBA students as well. You will also hear from my son Jonathon at the end of each chapter. Jonathon is a thirty-six-year-old entrepreneur and student of Zen who teaches me more about a new way of doing business in these polarizing times than any case study ever could.

Every generation and personality leads in its own way; and my premise is that to progress together, we have to lead with each other in mind. At best, we can only approximate what makes leaders perform brilliantly under pressure by studying the *practices* they incorporate into their leadership zeitgeist. Typical of the older and younger generations at work, we have a lot of differences, yet we need to find a way to blend, if we are going to get the work done.

More and more, I saw evidence that generations and personality types working together under one roof were unbelievably different in their thinking about business, the paradigms of leadership, and life in general. How could the older generation invite the younger generation to lead if they didn't speak the same language?

Were we continually missing the point the other was trying to make? Jon and I got by that way for a long time, and we were father and son. I started thinking about Jon and some of the things he

had challenged me on over the years—things I thought were just coming out of his philosophical weirdness that had no relevance to business. That was until Jon entered business and I realized corporations would be foolhardy not to want to attract talented people who could think, write, communicate, and lead like he did. Yet many of these selfsame institutions didn't have a clue about how to successfully approach and develop their Fortune 500 younger people.

I wasn't being touchy-feely by probing these questions, I was thinking about my business. There are new paradigms infusing our workplace, and older and younger leaders needed to be familiar with both sides of the coin or risk the big money, the big breakthroughs, getting left on the table.

I saw Jon and me as a metaphor for the problem. Jon's uncanny and natural leadership skills, eclectic interests, fearlessness, integrity, and ability to adapt were marks of what was great about his generation. My workaholic work ethic, "fight for a yes" stubbornness, creativity, stability, self-discipline, and toughness were the mark of mine. One generation and orientation needed the other, just like father and son need each other. Without a solid bond between the two, both are incomplete.

Like the old Native American proverb, we decided to walk a mile in the other's moccasins. I would walk fifty miles with Jon on his favorite trails, with him leading, and he would walk fifty miles with me in the places of my choosing. I didn't own a pair of hiking shoes when we started and Jon didn't own golf shoes. We agreed to finish the hundred miles no matter what.

We spent six months talking leadership, dissecting differences, exploring nuances, and growing closer. My efforts to "get human" with my son taught me firsthand that there are different ways to judge success for all people and that bringing those ways to the table makes us better people. And being a business person, always in search of hidden values, I discovered an incredible residual benefit to this openness—seeking to understand also makes us much better business people.

One of the stories that I told my son on our walk was from my own life and related to "**persistence**" which is on my checklist of 9 Principles for business leaders. On our hike that particular day we passed a very old stone wall separating the fields. Jonathon put his hand on a particularly odd-shaped moss-covered stone and said, "Imagine how many they had to throw back on the pile before they found this one?" I smiled. Jon asked me about my own story of

persistence, and I told him the one about how I've been a stutterer since I was five years old.

When I started school, I had no trouble understanding what my teachers wanted but I did have trouble answering their questions, because I stuttered badly back then. My stuttering got even more pronounced in grade school. My mother took me to every speech clinician she could find. They told her that she had to get me out of that school. My father was dead set against my leaving the Yeshiva, but Mom told him unconditionally after sixth grade I wasn't going back. If he insisted, she would leave him. I enrolled in public school and the stuttering lessened but did not disappear.

By my junior year I was treasurer of the class, head of the Honor Society, and editor of the newspaper. In my senior year, as editor of the yearbook, I gave speeches. I was a baseball pitcher on an outstanding racially mixed team. I worked on being out front all the time. I was constantly anxious about my stuttering, but at the same time, something was happening to me. Maybe it was how my mother brought me to speech therapy on two buses and a train. Or maybe it was how she taught herself to play baseball so she could teach me. Or maybe it was because I saw her teach herself how to play the piano. I can still hear her voice, "You can do anything, Sander!" I saw that she wasn't ever going to give up on me and that she was prepared to go absolutely all the way. I am convinced that this is ultimately the most important thing a person needs – total conviction that It Can Be Done.

After college, a stint in the army, and then to work while attending graduate school classes at night, I was invited to be an adjunct professor. Because of the stutter, speaking to a large group of students in a lecture hall was frightening to me. But I did it, and still do it to this day. Once in the business world, I was passed over for a VP spot. Years later I got a call from my former boss. He was dying of cancer, and wanted me to know something very important. I met him for dinner only to find out that I had been passed over for that big job because someone on the executive committee thought that stuttering was a sign of mental illness. The executive thought I would be an embarrassment to the company, and nobody had the courage to overrule him. My former boss confessed that he should have had that courage.

I realized then and now, how lucky I was to have persisted despite the circumstances to become CEO of a venerable health care advertising agency, and then CEO of my own firm. The point isn't that we've had hard times; the point is what we do with them. Do we turn them into excuses or challenges? Since that night at dinner, more than nineteen years ago, I realize how much that experience propelled me to become an advocate for stutterers and never to ever allow some backward notion to place a stigma on anyone.

I firmly believe that persistence separates the great ones from the mediocre. Quitting is not part of the vocabulary; it is not an option. Take a lot of deep breaths. Work beyond any notion of personal limitation until the job is done. Evaluate the course for what it is and take action in any aspect of your life.

As Chair of the Fordham Graduate School of Business Leadership Forum, I've noted that all the guest speakers agree that **persistence** is the ability to drive relentlessly and resourcefully toward the accomplishment of a desired end and to do it regardless of external circumstances. The mantra I apply in my company is: NO is only for today; fight for a YES tomorrow. Fight until you get it!

(Excerpted from **THE 100-MILE WALK: A Father and Son on a Quest to Find the Essence of Leadership** by Sander A. Flaum, and Jonathon A. Flaum, with Mechele Flaum)

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