

Speech to Raleigh Chamber YPN assembly on January 21, 2016

View or visit almost any news source and you will see reporting about decisions leaders made, new policies, or more likely, what they said about someone else. The image we have of leaders, whether corporate, political, local or otherwise, is shaped largely by what we hear from others. We get soundbites, comments or headlines about complex decisions and statements that are put into the context of the news “gatekeeper” even if that gatekeeper is a TV station or friend posting their thoughts on Facebook. Most times, the dilemma faced by the leader is very complex or at least has multiple sides of the story. And, what about the person or people on the other side of the story; do we ever hear from them?

Clearly, the perspective we get of leaders is controlled and filtered in nearly every case. We get second hand information that is not in context and we form opinions of that person. If we were shadowing that leader, how often would we form the same opinion as the one we assimilate through news reports and social media?

Developing into a leader is a long process by which one matures and evolves over time. Just as a plant is shaped by the soil, environment, minerals, sun and other factors, leaders, too, are shaped by many factors. A critical part of becoming a leader is what we can learn and observe from other leaders. In my development, I have found no mandatory class on becoming a leader, nor is there a handbook or instruction manual available. My most formative influences have come from “learning by doing” and observing true, authentic leaders.

For our society to advance, it is cliché to say we “stand on the shoulders of the generations that have come before us.” However, I believe this is very true. In many ways, “we” pick up where “they” left off. We inherit their inventions, policies, problems, and their quality of life. It is up to the “next” generation to take the figurative baton and run with it, before handing it off to the next generation. The question is, “will we leave it better than we found it?”

The objective in sharing these 7 lessons with you is to share what I have learned about leadership so that you may consider this in your ongoing development as a leader. Some

you already have learned for yourself and others may give you a perspective from someone else.

Before I get into the lessons I've learned, it is important to discuss what I think a leader is and what I think a leader is not. The word "leader" and the term "leadership" have very vague definitions in the English language; just look the words up in the Merriam-Webster dictionary- their definitions are (a) the office or position of a leader, (b) capacity to lead, (c) the act or an instance of leading. You'll gain no understanding of the words that are used in daily life. Maybe this is why so many people are unclear. Therefore, we must explore the meaning of the words to establish a foundation to begin our discussion.

In the book, the "21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership," one of the world's foremost experts on leadership, John Maxwell, sums up his definition of leadership as "leadership is influence - nothing more, nothing less."

From here, definitions vary and each "expert" proposes his or her own definition. Clearly, the word and concept that is talked about ad nauseum lacks clarity. Perhaps this is why a quick search online shows between 600,000 and 1,000,000 books are written each year on the topic. We seem to be living in a paradoxical time when the world is stuck on understanding leadership and crying for strong leadership at the same time.

For purposes of this talk, we'll look at leadership from the perspective of someone that feels the responsibility to leave the world better than they found it while inspiring others to do the same. This implies that anyone that wants to take responsibility is on their way to becoming a leader. Looking at the term this way is inclusive and speaks to the heart of what we hope a leader will do. Ultimately, strong, visionary leaders gain influence by gaining followers (in one shape or another). I would propose, however, that adding a generation to the world of people that saw themselves as leaders would have a greater effect than one or two famous national or international leaders could ever have. The bottom line is that if you came here today, you think of yourself as a leader and that is undoubtedly a great human perspective to have, if, for nothing less than you feel responsible for the future.

Now, let's get into the 7 lessons I've learned, but wish I knew much earlier. In baseball, I learned that practice doesn't make perfect, like so many say; I learned that perfect practice

makes perfect. In much the same spirit, the lessons I'll share are lessons I am practicing and cannot claim to have perfected.

These are 7 lessons I had to discover:

Mentoring Lesson #1: You **can** change the world

As Margaret Mead is quoted as saying, "one person, or a small group, really can change the world, and often times it is the only way." Margaret Mead was a cultural anthropologist who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her work. Passionate leaders that can define an issue and offer a reasonable solution are in short number and thus, have a decent chance at success at any level. Not to discount the influence of money in the decision making process, but a passionate and vocal group of people always have an influence, even if their solution isn't exactly prescribed to. For example, the story of the founding of the "Florida Growth Fund" is one worth sharing.

"Florida Growth Fund" as of June 30, 2015, has invested \$402 million in 30 technology and high-growth companies and 23 private equity funds, creating 14,545 jobs in Florida with an average annual salary of \$67,536. All while returning 11.1% net internal rate of return and distributing \$143 million back into Florida's Retirement System.

Mentoring Lesson #2: Perseverance and passion

Have you ever wondered what separates the "good" from the "great?" Whether you want to talk about sports, business or politics, two traits I believe are always exemplified by winners- perseverance and passion. Have you ever wondered why that short kid make the varsity basketball team? Have you wondered why the foster child of immigrants built one of America's largest and most successful companies (Steve Jobs...Apple)? The examples are endless, and we can all think of people in our lives that "out performed" expectations that society placed on them. If you look closely, you'll discover they persevered through adversity at some stage in development. In some cases, they just kept at it until all obstacles where defeated. You'll also find a deep passion that has guided them through trials and tribulations. Realizing that these traits rank at the top of the profile of great leaders is a major part of my understanding of leadership. The lesson for all of us is that (1) nothing

comes easy, and (2) we should only embark on careers and initiatives that we are passionate about. Without passion to drive us through the difficult times, we are unlikely to have the perseverance to ultimately succeed. I challenge you to use this filter in looking at people that are “good” at their chosen profession and the people that are “great.” The dividing line is almost always colored with perseverance and passion.

Mentoring Lesson #3: Get ahead to stay on top

Many people are confused by too much information, determining what the expectation is and how to manage priorities. Almost no one comes out of school with an established way to staying organized. These key skills weren't taught in any of my college classes and they probably weren't taught in yours either.

First, let's get into information overload. The most challenging thing for me at work is managing information. I could spend my entire work day in email, online doing research or reading reports. However, I would never be successful at my responsibilities. One of the great challenges of current times is managing an unlimited amount of information. One of the fastest growing industry sectors is data analytics, which is indicative of our current state of information.

Let's start with the premise that “less is more,” and “just in time” information is acceptable. Managing our information flow is critical. Let's return to nature for a lesson- does a fish in a river eat everything edible that comes by? Does a plant absorb more water than it needs? With a limited background in biology, we know intuitively that the answer to these two questions are clearly “no.” So, then, why would we try to take in all the information that “flows” past us every day? We simply aren't wired to process this much stuff. We need to find ways to establish “filters” that help us manage what information makes it through to our brains. These may be news feeds, certain news sources, certain people, etc. Managing the information we take in helps free our brain for more important tasks. Just like white space on a sheet of paper, we need some white space in our lives to allow us time to process the information we need. A growing field of research is looking at the value of quality sleep and keeping a journal in order to function at an optimal level. Create an experiment for yourself. Restrict intake of information for one week, keep a journal and get 7-8 hours of sleep every night. See what this does to your creativity, focus and stress level.

The next level of functioning is another skill that can be learned and improved with experience- setting and managing expectations. This is something that I've had to learn because of my natural tendency to try and "take on the world." As a manager, I've learned to ask good questions of direct reports to ensure they can deliver on what is being asked of them. Early in your career, it is important to have open and honest conversations about what is expected, and, furthermore, what is the priority. In a world that demands more and more, quality is too often compromised by quantity. As young employees trying to prove ourselves, we take on additional tasks, sometimes at the detriment of the quality of our work product. Asking good questions is key to performance in this area. A few examples of appropriate questions are "what deliverable is expected and when?" "Is this new task a top priority, and if so, what currently on my list should be delayed?" Respectfully arriving at a well thought out answer through dialogue keeps expectations in check and priorities well established. Nothing is worse than working extremely hard and, yet, not accomplishing the main priorities. This type of dialogue also demonstrates a grasp of your position and role.

—Give example of what I do on Sunday night and bullet journal—

Mentoring Lesson #4: Focus on the important, not always the urgent

Life is a balance between the important and the urgent. Understanding that these two things aren't always the same thing is an important step in developing as a leader. People that are effective and productive tend to attract more work because they "get it done."

—Publix; bathroom cleaning example—

Gaining experience and wisdom helps keep us grounded in what is important and what can maybe wait until tomorrow. One mental filter I use is to ask myself "one year from now, what will be the most important task I would have accomplished this week?" I tend to use weekly goals, but that is just a personal preference, and I always focus on the most critical because I know that some things become "urgent" and I work to manage those in the context of keeping first things first. Life does throw curveballs, but understanding what is most important helps us to navigate those tricky scenarios. If everything is important, nothing is important.

Mentoring Lesson #5: Choose your mentors wisely

I have had tremendously helpful mentors in my career and they've all contributed in unique ways. However, I have always avoided people that seem to already have everything figured out. These people are dangerous and will quickly lead you down the wrong path. They, themselves, likely have a lot of learning to do. Secondly, I've avoided mentors that have given up on their dreams because I always figured they would try and talk me out of mine.

Knowing who to listen to is often the trickiest part of the mentoring experience. I know that I wouldn't have been given leadership opportunities throughout my life if people were invested in helping me. And, there in lies an important lesson. If you aren't ready for others to help you, why should they? Being open to this type of relationship is the first step in growing through a mentor. Choosing someone that can personally add to your understanding is another. They may not be the person you hope to be someday because different mentors can offer different lessons at each point in our own development journey. Please, just don't be fooled by people that haven't figured out they don't know everything.

—Give pyramid example—

Mentoring Lesson #6: The whole cloth

After having kids, and as responsibilities at work got more demanding, I began to realize that success was more than just having the right answer. The importance of nutrition and physical activity became much clearer to me. Perhaps our body (a machine) gets more calibrated to all life's factors as we get a little older. Getting ahead of these "outside the office" factors is important to figure out before the responsibilities and stress start to mount. Hitting a sales target during the week and partying every weekend is a different animal than a mortgage payment, kids, a marriage, and a team of employees. Just like we all learned to walk before we ran, we should take the whole cloth approach to becoming a leader before the day comes when we have substantial responsibilities.

Mentoring Lesson #7: Learning from failures

Leaders fail and move on, but great leaders learn from these failures. Understanding “what happened” is key to growing. Wisdom is gained in winning and losing, but many people will tell you there is more to learn from losing. Taking the time to debrief key initiatives or big projects is an important step in the process. It is in these moments that we can pull lessons that textbooks can’t teach. Plus, who wants to make the same mistake twice?

—Talk about how important Sarah has been as the underpinning. —

In conclusion,

Leadership is defined in many different ways, and we’ve already taken a stab at the definition. So many people assume leadership comes from someone with a title, but the definition and impact you can make is so much broader than that. Office and team dynamics are such that the infusion of a hard-working, smart and energetic young person can help to set the culture. This is when leadership and management will take notice.

How do you become a leader? How do you get started? I feel that deciding to become a leader is a mindset and doesn’t have to end once you’ve made this decision. Let’s take this out of the theoretical and look at the practical steps. First, this is a decision that you are going to be serious, dedicated and always be the example. Nothing about those decisions is easy. This isn’t “coasting.” This is leading from the front.

Deciding to be serious doesn’t mean you can’t have fun, it means YOU take responsibility. Many people look to pass the buck or minimize their exposure for consequences if something doesn’t go well, but leaders don’t. Leaders claim responsibility, act like they own it and then are willing to be accountable for the results. While this may seem risky for a new club president or even someone in their first career job, this is actually the mindset that managers and executives are looking for. Look at this mindset from the CEO’s perspective. Imagine you have two new employees, one who is timid and only gives an idea when asked, and one who takes responsibility for their project and seeks out input from others inside and outside the organization. The person that takes responsibility is exhibiting traits of a leader. No one gets promoted when they don’t take responsibility, because, by definition, managers are responsible.

The most overlooked aspect of being a leader is “setting the example.” From day 1 of a career, anyone can do this. From professional dress to manners, this is a skill that is easier said than done. Most people believe they are setting the example, but they are lying to themselves. Actually being the example is a daily grind. This includes many demands including punctuality, note-taking, working and achieving deadlines, presenting recommendations and not problems, speaking up at the appropriate times and being competent. The person setting the example should aim to be above reproach. One important lesson is to do this with humility. No one expects the recent college grad to draft the strategy to grow organizational revenue by a \$10 million dollars, but everyone expects a recent college grad to write well, put forth well-researched ideas and be dedicated to delivering on all assignments. I’ve always followed Teddy Roosevelt’s philosophy on the accord of overachieving on each task knowing that doing a great job will open new opportunities.