

# STYLUS

Scratching Beneath the Surface

stylus n. an instrument of metal, bone, or the like,  
used by the ancients for writing

## LEADERSHIP What is Your Role as Leader?

By Nina Durfee

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "leadership"?

At one time, it may have been the words, "My fellow Americans" spoken from a podium. As we're becoming painfully more aware, that has nothing to do with it. The following true stories illustrate leadership on many levels.

When my 17-year-old son Matthew called home to say, "Mom, I've been in an accident," my survival response was, "Is anyone hurt?" He assured me everyone was fine, and I transferred to practical mode. "What happened?" He informed me he had rear-ended a pickup in moving traffic. "What were you doing?" I asked.

"Changing the CD player." Here I wanted to erupt into frustrated parent mode – how many times have I told you, yada, yada, yada. I got the first word out and he stopped me. "Mom, I don't need the lecture." Deep breath. Moving right along. . .

"What's next?" revealed that he was exchanging insurance info with the other driver, who would get an estimate for damages and go from there. My son received a traffic ticket. Part of me said "yes!" – meant in only the nicest here's-the-natural-consequences kind of way, and relieved that it wasn't my job to mete out "punishment."

Several days went by, during which my son sweated bullets wondering what the dollar damages would be, how it would affect his insurance, whether I'd ever let him drive again. Finally, the other driver called to say it would cost \$600 to fix his bumper, and that if Matthew would pay him directly, he promised not to report it on insurance. This gift gave us several choices, one of which was NOT for Matthew to pay the \$600 – he just didn't have it.

(1) I could take a credit card draw and be done with it, except for the exasperation.

(2) I could pay it and induct my son into slavery as a stout lesson, which didn't bode

well for our relationship.

(3) I could front the money and have Matthew pay me back, with or without interest.

(4) Matthew could figure it out on his own.

Matthew volunteered to take sole responsibility, but as a full-time high-school student involved in sports and slinging McBurgers part-time, he didn't know quite how to make it happen. He asked the man if he could pay \$200 now and promise the rest within a few months. The man said that was fine, but he wanted Matthew to hand-deliver the payments to him at his home. Hmmmm. Mom's radar was up. Why did this man want my son at his home? Matt insisted he would remain alert and I was not to worry.

Matthew delivered the first payment and, several weeks later, the second. When he delivered the third and final payment of \$200, the man greeted him at the door and took the money. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out \$400 and handed all of the money back to Matthew.

"I'm not going to fix the bumper," he said. "You've shown integrity and responsibility. You probably need this money more than I do. Be careful behind the wheel."

That experience will affect Matthew the rest of his life. Not only that, it has affected me, my husband, our other sons, and now you. *That's* leadership.

I could pick this apart and analyze all the nuances of leadership, trust, integrity, human dignity, responsibility and goodwill displayed throughout this story. Doing so would be an injustice to you. I know you already get it.

## **Contrast**

The outgoing executive director of a large corporation had been an even-keel, mellow kind of guy who got the job done. Supervisors, project managers and employees accomplished tasks within the procedural standards of the 40-hour work week with only occasional overtime.

The new incoming director was a 24-7 kind of guy. While he did not dictate a change from the 40-hour standard, it was in his nature to never stop working. He was *always* at work. His personality, presence and enthusiasm were so strong that supervisors, managers and employees emulated his behavior without being asked. They arrived early and stayed late. They missed doctor appointments and soccer games. They cut their vacations short. When their bodies were at home, they stayed in touch by email and cell phones. One project manager reported that even in the event she chose to turn off her communication channel, she was ridden with anxiety and anticipation that on her return she'd be unable to catch up. She was living up to standards set by someone else.

The behavior of one person – behavior that came naturally to him because it was part of his essence – influenced the lives of hundreds of people. The employee manual stayed the same. The company still required only a 40-hour week. But the employees were like children who do what we do, not what we say, even when it is to our detriment!

The project manager who realized this wondered: what if I choose to remain incommunicado on my days off and vacations? What if I show my personal time the same reverence I've been giving my employer? Her immediate fear was that she'd suffer from bucking the system. She'd be an outcast, look like a slacker. But the executive who changed the system by his actions was *only one person*, and others emulated him because he was so sure and natural in his actions that others assumed it must be the way to be.

The project manager is also only one person. If she chooses to act from her own place of integrity and value, her presence will be more powerful. What effect will that influence have on those in her immediate circle? Where will it spread?

### **Leadership is Action from Essence**

Leadership is not the self-serving act of pulling people around like a cow with a nose ring. It's not a stance of I'm right and you're wrong. It is action taken from a place of authenticity that puts others at choice and assumes they are capable, resourceful and responsible.

We lead with every thing we do or choose not to do. Our effect depends on the degree to which we honor our core values. How we respond or don't respond to our clients, how we follow up on our commitments or let them lapse, how we respect or disrespect others sends a message. Some people are more easily influenced than others, but *every single one of us* has an impact on everyone else we meet.

How do you display leadership in your role as a family member, a business owner, a human being? What legacy will your leadership leave behind?