

Leaders Lead from the Front
Marshall M. Stewart

In today's world of business and education, it may be quite challenging to discover the actual leader who is calling the shots and steering the organization's wheel. Oh, it is quite simple to locate the CEO. Simply ride to the top floor, step onto the plush carpet and enter the double mahogany doors and there you stand, facing a room-wide paneled glass window that overlooks the best view in the entire building; however, you may have entered the chief operating officer's palatial retreat—or more times than not, his/her citadel—but you have not found the organization's *leader*. What constitutes this individual's stature, standard, title, or level of respect? From my decades' long experiences and, well, simply observing, the true leader is one who is *not* in the well-carpeted and perfectly climate-controlled environment. The leader can be found up front, in the trenches, on the assembly line, or in the sewage-filled hole, hands dirty and beads of well-earned sweat dripping endlessly in the quest to fulfill the mission.

It has been interesting to observe the various “leaders” for whom I have worked, in both education and other fields throughout my life (newspaper, Roses stores, feed mill, Burger King, officiating). My father ran a feed mill for some forty years, yet he was not the man in charge, at least, *his* name was not the one on the office door. That individual was indeed good at paperwork, and good at reporting to the mill's owner; however, he could not actually operate the mill. My father worked first shift, but in reality, he worked all shifts, rarely working under 15 hours a day. If something went wrong, my dad was called. If someone needed to be checked off for hiring, my dad was called. If the railroad had issues or the Pepsi Cola delivery man needed access to the mill, it was my dad who was called. My father knew every corner of that old mill, every conveyor belt, every spot on the pellet mill to hit with the hammer to make it go back into operation, and he knew how to operate the wall-sized IBM computer with the punch cards and

huge, multi-colored bulbs. No one else understood it, and at that time in my life, at 14-years old, neither did I—*my father was the leader of that mill*. What is more interesting, now that I look back forty years ago, is that on top of this leadership role, my father was a Baptist preacher, a very clear leadership role that left no questions about who was at the top. I share this story to point out that, though I failed to recognize it until decades later, that my father was a leader who knew how to lead organizations as both *the worker* and as *the leader*. I asked him about this twelve years ago, and he reminded me, in a much softer voice at this point, that the “People who get the most done are those who do the most with the people.” Dad only had a sixth-grade education, served in the United States Navy, and then enlisted in the Army, but dad became a leader by doing.

This epistle is not meant to shine a bright spotlight on my father. He would never allow that. It is simply the foundation on which I constructed my view of true leadership. It is why, no matter whether I have served as an assistant principal, graduation coach, principal, or curriculum specialist, I always made my way back into classrooms. I do not sit or stand and watch. I participate. I ask and answer questions. I teach. I have expected my peers, my assistant principals, my athletic directors, anyone who holds a teaching license, to get back into the classroom at every opportunity. They need to be seen as teachers—master teachers—who are rowing in the same direction with the same fervor and dripping with the same sweat of classroom teachers. It is what I have and always expect of myself. Regardless of the title of assistant, principal, director, specialist, or even superintendent, I am first and foremost—*a teacher*. If I as the organization’s leader expect high scores, accountability, effort, and success, then I must be at the forefront of that endeavor, not at the rear in the cozy office. The great United States Army General George S. Patton once quipped, “Lead me, follow me, or get out of my way.” Patton was

a leader, a once in a millennium type leader. But note the first two words of his leadership mantra—*lead me*. Effective leaders know when to step aside, let the subordinate pass, and fall in line, all for the sole purpose of achieving the organization’s goal of success. Sometimes, being led is the greatest show of true leadership. The world of education is not the battlefields on which an army general led; however, it is an ever-changing landscape on which leaders must be ready to face an uncertain tomorrow filled with private, charter, home, and traditional schools battling for money, prestige, and existence. It can be a scary profession at times, and that is nothing for a leader to fear. In fact, the same General Patton, the great leader he was, also said “All men are afraid of battle.” Despite the shared fear, effective leaders, with their own fears, leads their organization forward, from the front, to get the job done.

Because, in the end, as my dad told me from his chair in the front yard from my old homeplace in Robbins, North Carolina, back in 2012, “People who get the most done are those who do the most with the people.”

My dad moved on to that “Undiscovered country from which no traveler returns” on June 23, 2023. He made me the leader I am, and the leader who shapes the leaders of tomorrow.

--Marshall M. Stewart, June 2024