

THOUGHTS ON EXCELLENT LEADERSHIP

by Karl Pister



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INSPIRING EXCELLENCE



Inspired to a Different Level

In retrospect on my path of parenting, I probably could have been classified as fairly rigid on some things. One item was playing the piano. There is a history here -some might call it an excuse- however, read on.

When I was in third grade, I was a total and complete baseball fanatic. I remember one spring day, when the mountain winter was beginning to thaw, and it was perfect baseball weather, that my mother, who was a concert-level pianist, presented me with a choice. I could either play Little League baseball or I could take piano lessons.





Now my mother was an elementary school teacher and a brilliant parent. However, something was lacking that day, in her thinking, because there was really only one choice for me. And I had a blast playing third base that year and for the next few years. However, after getting hit by a pitch three times in one game in the sixth grade, I decided that being a target was not fun, and gave up competitive baseball.

So then, I not only did not play baseball, but I also didn't play the piano. Zero for two.

I have, for a long time, regretted the piano decision. I made sure that our children did not make that error. So it was mandatory, in the Pister household, from kindergarten to eighth grade, to take piano lessons. Significant protests on that throughout the years. However, it is of note that all four children, now ranging from 35 down to 27 years of age, continue their musical journey with pianos in their homes.

Jump forward a generation to our seven-year-old grandson, Jack. He is four months into his musical piano path, and the pain of practice was often evident, both from the producer and the listener.



Notice that I say 'was'. Something happened a few weeks ago that seems to have changed his perception. And this is where the leadership lessons start to apply. It was Sunday afternoon and our youngest daughter, Emma, who is the most proficient musically of the children, was at the keyboard, playing beautiful music. Jack wandered over and asked if he could play along with her.

Before I go on with this story, pause for a moment and consider what your natural response to this request might have been. The gap between proficiencies is huge. There was almost no way to have Jack participate without significant change to the outcome. Most of us, myself included, probably would have politely deferred and continued playing. Not to be unkind in any way, but the request just didn't fit.

However, what happened next is significant. Emma stopped playing, had Jack sit down on the piano bench to her left, and stopped to explain. She showed him the notes from his basic, beginner lessons. From A-G. Then she showed him those same notes on her musical score. Smaller on the page, mixed in on both the bass and treble clefs, but still the same notes, just a different context, and placement.

With careful instruction on the rhythm and beat, she started playing her part on the upper part of the keyboard. She then told him where to start playing his simple part, incorporating the basic notes that he was accustomed to on his simple



beginner's music into a much more complex score. They continued like this, on different pieces of music, for easily thirty minutes.

What has been the change in results? No more pushing to practice. No more complaining. Even on a recent trip he found a piano and practiced. No pushing, no prodding. In my favorite phrase, he, even at the young age of seven, *was inspired to be accountable to improve, on his own initiative.*

So let's jump to your world. I cringe in meetings where the phrase is used "we need to hold people accountable". While it is a common and understandable phrase, it is rarely sustainable. It is level one, positional leadership, as defined by John Maxwell in his book, *The Five Levels of Leadership*. People will comply because they have to, until either they leave or you do.

What is sustainable is competent people, well-led and inspired. Inspired to be accountable.

It is your job to inspire, just as Emma did with Jack.

While it may seem a simple example, what happened at the piano with Jack and Emma can happen between you and those that you have responsibility for in your leadership. I many times question, when there are performance issues, if it is a level of ability with those who are led, or a lack of ability with the leader. An unfortunate amount of times it is the latter.



People are usually very familiar with their 'notes'. They come to work wanting to be successful. However, no one has taken the time to explain the larger 'composition'. The knowledge you have of the 'music', both by practice and experience, can only be shared by you. They could learn, but it might take much longer than you, or the organization, would want.

Comments such as:

They should know...

They need to learn...

I don't have time to teach...

should never come out of a leader's mouth. There might be exceptions, but those are few.

Leaders are teachers. Leaders are exemplars. That may sound like a formidable task and it is inescapable. And phenomenally rewarding since inspired people, whether a seven year-old, or a highly trained professional, do remarkable things.





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