

The **ROCK** and the *Fish* :

TEACHABLE POINTS OF VIEW FOR LEADERSHIP

By Edward Betof

Becton Dickinson University uses powerful stories to convey leadership values.

Noel Tichy says it best in his book, *The Leadership Engine*: “Simply put, if you are not teaching, you’re not leading. If you want to become a teacher, the best place to start is by developing your own teachable points of view about ideas, values, emotional energy, and edge.”

Becton, Dickinson and Company (BD) has taken that quote to heart. It has raised the bar for those in managerial and leadership roles by elevating its expectations for results—the “what” of a leader’s responsibilities. Its expectation of how those results are achieved also has increased.

Continuous learning and improvement are vital to BD’s success and are evident in the performance of the company’s top associates and leaders, as well as in their work processes.

Success as a leader requires a number of characteristics and capabilities. The most effective leaders are able to derive and articulate a vision, and execute that vision by working with and through others. Many of BD’s best leaders are also teachers and coaches at heart. More than 500 of BD’s leaders teach within BD University (BDU).

Company leaders who do not teach formally within BDU are often surprised to find that others view them as teachers and coaches because of the way they conduct themselves daily. They spend a lot of time informally teaching and

coaching, and for many, these activities represent the roots of leadership. They serve as role models, and stimulate others to think. As Tichy says, "They are always teaching, even when they appear to be doing something else. Leaders treat every face-to-face encounter as a teaching and learning opportunity."

So what is the common denominator for high performance leaders who, in fact, lead by example and by teaching, coaching, and developing others? High performance leaders value the opportunity to transfer their knowledge to others and always have leadership teachable points of view—key values and ideas that have influenced a leader's personal development, performance, and career success—that are shown through stories or powerful descriptions of important topics.

Resourcefulness

In the university's Advanced Leadership Development Program (ALDP), I use a personal childhood story as a vivid illustration of how being resourceful has characterized my leadership agenda in every role that I have held during my career.

My story, entitled "Sock Balls, Powdered Milk, and Hot Dog Buns," is my leadership teachable point of view on the importance of being resourceful and finding solutions when possibilities are limited. I grew up as one of four brothers in a loving home, without much in the way of financial means, and with a mother and father who always, somehow, seemed to make do.

My leadership teachable point of view illustration describes how my resourceful mother regularly turned old, floppy, worn out cotton socks into tightly bound sock balls that could be used for street games. With equal creativity, she would regularly turn one quart of milk into a gallon every day through the alchemy of dehydrated, powdered milk, water, and a single bottle of fresh, whole milk. Also, through her wonders in the kitchen, she turned Saturday night's left over hot dog buns into Monday's lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The story connects with ALDP participants by stimulating memories and deep introspection of what is important to the leaders who are participating in the program. It helps each of us remember the experiences we have had that have shaped our value system as it is today, and reinforces the key principles that guide us in our interactions with others and in the pursuit of technical excellence. Importantly, teachable points of view only are effective when the words



are modeled regularly by the leader on the job and communicate clear expectations of others.

Leadership points of view

All effective leaders have points of view on topics that are vital to their success and the success of the organization they lead. Leadership points of view are most frequently centered on deeply held beliefs in such areas as:

- how to grow a business
- how to exceed customer expectations
- how to achieve one's potential
- how values and ethics are essential for success
- how teaching, coaching, or mentoring brings out the best in others
- how to use courage and fierce resolve to achieve goals and work with others
- how humility plays a role in successes and effectiveness.

ALDP participants are asked to identify and discuss a personal leadership teachable point of view they have on one of the topics listed above, or any other topic of importance that is part of who they are. In the first hour of the leadership development program, participants present a teachable point of view to another participant in the program. Several also are asked to present to the large group on a voluntary basis.

The rock and the fish

As a participant in the leadership development class, Sharon Presnell, director of cell and tissue technologies at Becton, Dickinson and Company, was asked to describe her leadership teachable point of view, the key circumstances and people behind this point of view, and the lessons learned from the experience. Below is her story:

When I took the ALDP class at BDU, one of the many meaningful things I brought home with me was the leadership teachable point of view. Ed Betof's story of sock balls, powdered milk, and hot dog buns really got me thinking about some of the early experiences of my life and how they have affected who I am today—how I approach things and, as a manager, which behaviors I admire and like to reward.

I believe if you have learned something and don't actually use it, then you have wasted both your time and the person's time who taught it to you. So, when I returned from the offsite program, I decided to share two leadership teachable point of view stories with my team, and in the process I created two awards, each based on the principle taught by the story.

The award that accompanies the story of the rock is an actual rock, and the award that accompanies the story of the fish started life as a stuffed toy shark, but has been lovingly modified along the way so that it now hangs from a wooden stand by a string. The awards were given to individuals who exemplified that principle of the story in some visible way, thereby making a

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meaningful contribution to our team's efforts, as well as setting great examples for others.

The following rules apply to the awards:

1. *The recipient's name is written on the award.*
2. *The recipient keeps the award until they witness the behavior in another, at which point they write that person's name on the fish or rock and pass it on.*
3. *The giver of the rock or fish must tell:*
 - *the original rock or fish story*
 - *what they observed the new recipient do that led them to pass on the rock or fish*
 - *(optional) their own leadership teachable point of view.*

The rock. *I grew up in the foothill region of the North Carolina Blue Ridge Mountains with a wonderful view of Pilot Mountain right in my back yard. We were far from wealthy, but I never realized that until I was much older. We were happy, and we pretty much lived like everyone else. My mother was my teacher until I entered first grade, and in many ways still is today. She taught reading, writing, math, and consequences. The latter subject was taught daily in the way I was disciplined, and subtly, as we would sit and make up stories that stimulated my imagination and gently helped me recognize and plan for consequences. I remember one particular story that we told repeatedly, always a little differently, usually sitting by the neighbor's pond. I would throw a rock in the pond and Mom would ask, "Where did the rock go?"*

"To the bottom," I answered.

"What was on the bottom?" she asked, "...use your imagination."

"A fish?"

"Yes! A fish! But...poor fish, the rock might have hit him on the head," answered Mom. "Next time, let's tell the fish there's a rock coming. What else happened when you threw your rock?"

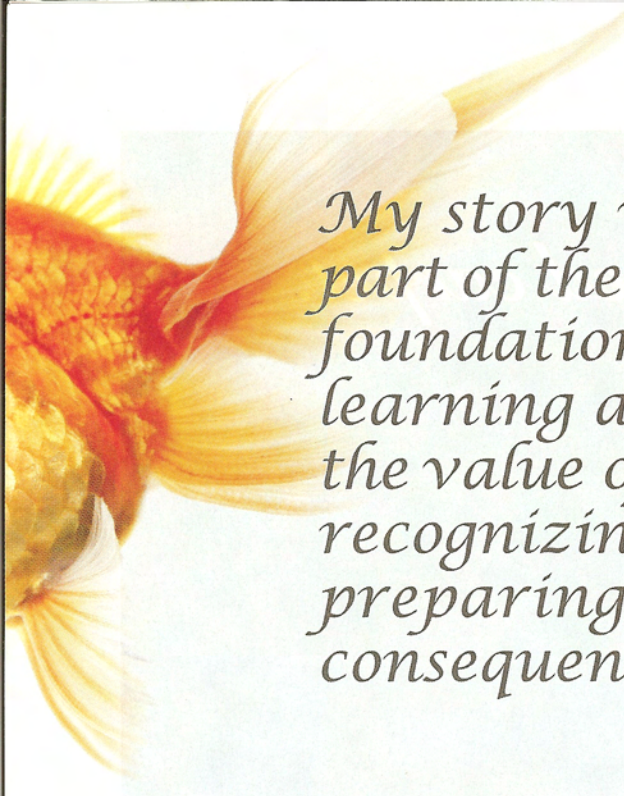
"There was a big splash."

"See the frogs on the lily pads?," asked Mom. "They got all wet from the waves. What could we do to protect the frogs from the waves?"

"Give them all tiny umbrellas," I suggested.

"Yes....that's a great idea."

And on we would go until we had elaborately prepared all the pond creatures for the incoming rock



My story was part of the foundational learning about the value of recognizing and preparing for consequences.

Photo by iStock Photo

so they were not surprised or injured. Although a silly example, it was part of the foundational learning about the value of recognizing and preparing for consequences—realizing that every word and action, no matter how simple, has the power to have sometimes substantial effects on others around us, and that there can sometimes be unpleasant consequences for acting without consideration for the impact on others.

The rock award for disciplined thought and action has been passed along to individuals who have had success at work because they planned, were inclusive of others, and thought ahead of time about the consequences of both success and failure—having a clear plan of action for both circumstances.

The fish. I have an older sister, and needless to say she was not thrilled when I came along. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons, we would picnic and fish by the neighbor's pond. At some point, my sister acquired a little fishing rod that my dad helped her rig and bait. On this particular Sunday, she was fishing with no real interest in sharing the rod with her little sister.

My dad helped me deal with my disappointment by teaching me that there is always an alternative. We

took a stick and tied a string on one end. Mom furnished a safety pin, onto which I squished a chunk of doughy white bread. I sat on the bank of the pond dangling that soggy bread in the water for what seemed like a long time while my sister gloated with her fancy rod—but I had faith! My parents still tell the story of how I caught a catfish with a piece of soggy bread on the end of a safety pin (and it still irritates my sister to hear the story, more than 30 years later!)

My dad has the heart and soul of the innovator—keeping at something when most would have given up, doing amazing things such as building goose-neck horse trailers out of scrap metal and taking rusty old cars out of cow pastures and restoring them to auction-quality, beautiful works of automotive art.

The fish award is about achieving great results through innovation, persistence, and resourcefulness. This award is given to individuals who use ingenuity and a creative approach to solve a problem—persisting along their path with precision and patience until the job is done. Most often these recipients have created a simple solution to a complex problem without elaborate resources.

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Implementation concepts

All effective leaders have teachable points of view, which should be modeled regularly and communicated in words—preferably stories. To design them, leaders should teach, not lead.

Every leader has stories of events that shaped her thinking, and classroom learning about those events should be applied in real-time work settings to improve individual and organizational capabilities. **T+D**

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