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THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #83 -



If we were born with an innate desire to run toward danger, mankind would have ceased to exist long ago. Instead, throughout the animal kingdom, we are born with the ability to know when a situation is dangerous and the knowledge to flee from it (or we are taught to do so shortly after birth). This is why eight billion people, rather than just flowers, now populate the earth.

However, regardless of the population explosion, staying safe does not mean we are flourishing. Data suggests quite the opposite. Suicide rates have increased by more than 30% this century. Between 2016 and 2019, childhood diagnoses of anxiety rose by 27% and depression by 24%. Overall, more than a quarter of all Americans (51 million) suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder. More than two-thirds of US adults are overweight, with more than one-third of those classified as obese. Sixty percent of people are disengaged and unhappy at work.

There are obviously countless reasons for these challenges, but one consistent factor that helps alleviate stress, pressure, and unhappiness is being a member of a great team (spouse, family, school, athletic, business). Great teammates consistently meet and exceed two standards: 1) set the example and 2) hold teammates accountable to set the example. To consistently hold others accountable requires courage. We are not born courageous. Therefore, we must develop it within ourselves and teach it to our progeny to ensure they don't just populate the earth but also flourish while doing so.

Typically, when we think of people who showed great courage, we think of major historical figures or events. George Washington, Winston Churchill, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King to name a few. We can likely come up with countless examples of less famous people exhibiting courage too. Sadly, there are many more examples of people not exhibiting it. That is unfortunate for our families, businesses, schools, athletic teams, and for our country. It is unfortunate for all the teams of which we are privileged to be a part.

Parents, coaches, teachers, school administrators, and business leaders alike should teach, foster and develop courage. Often, we don't. Since I started coaching youth sports, one of our team rules has been that when an athlete arrives at the gym or field, they must immediately find the coaches, shake hands and say "hello, Coach." It appears to me that fewer and fewer parents are teaching their children to shake hands firmly, look people in the eye, and introduce themselves. I think they are doing a disservice to their child by not teaching them basic good manners but as importantly, parents are missing an opportunity to develop courage, and its byproduct, confidence, within their children. It is uncomfortable for a young person to interact with an adult. By doing so immediately upon arriving at the gym or field, that young person does something that requires courage, and because they do it successfully, their confidence grows. They start practice feeling good about themselves. Feeling confident. Exhibiting courage allows them to feel this way. Recently, a parent accused me of causing anxiety in their child by requiring them to shake hands.

School administrators teach our children that if they see someone on the playground doing something wrong, being mean, or bullying someone else, they are to go and tell a teacher immediately. I disagree. I teach my son and daughter, if they see someone bullying or being mean to another student, to go and talk to the bully. I appreciate that doing so will make them nervous. I appreciate that doing so may even require them to defend the person being bullied or themselves. I do appreciate that doing so might not be "safe", but my goal for my children in life is not to be safe. Living a safe life is the surest way to an unhappy one. I want my children to be happy. Without courage, and the confidence it instills, they may still have a pleasurable life, but it will not be a happy one. They will not flourish.

On corporate teams, how often does one team member have an issue with another team member, and rather than discuss the issue with their teammate, instead goes to talk to the team leader about it? That is the behavior of someone who lacks courage. The Program challenges business leaders who are dealing with these issues to stop doing so. Rather, they should ask that teammate if they have spoken to the other teammate prior to speaking with the leader. If the answer is no, we suggest the leader not only tell the teammate to do so, but also provide guidance, mentorship, and training on how to speak to someone with whom they have a disagreement. This requires courage, but once they do so, they will have greater confidence.

Failing to instill courage in our young children manifests itself as they become teenagers, young adults, and into adulthood in how people of all ages use text messages, emails, and social media. This past winter season, my son's 5th grade basketball team was blessed by having one of the most talented 11-year-old basketball players I have ever seen. We regularly blew teams out because of him, and everyone on our team was thereby able to play a lot, regardless of talent level. Then we had our first close game, and not everybody on our team played as much as they had been used to playing. That night, our head coach received an angry text message from the mother of one of the players complaining about his lack of playing time. If you want your child to gain and exhibit courage, have your child speak (not text, not email, not tweet) to the coach about their playing time. Not you! I suggest you practice that conversation with your child. Play the part of the coach and have your child speak to you. Rehearse how and what they will speak to the actual coach about. Your child will be nervous. Practice helps alleviate some of it, but admittedly, not all of it. However, because they are nervous, after they have the actual conversation with their coach, because they showed courage, they will be more confident.

The following day, our head coach couldn't make the game, so I was the acting head coach. We blew the team out by thirty points and had the opportunity to play every team member an equal amount. In the locker room after the game, I explained to the team that the night before, not everyone got as much playing time as they had during the game we just finished. I further explained that that was NOT because of who the head coach was. That was because of what the scoreboard was. I went on to explain to our athletes that if they wanted more playing time, they should do three things: 1) show up at practice, 2) give 100% while there, and 3) if they had time to watch tv or play video games, they had time that they could sacrifice to work on their basketball skills. To ensure that nothing would be lost in translation, I sent a group text to the parents of our athletes explaining what I had discussed with their sons. Immediately, the husband of the wife who texted our head coach the night before sent back a group message saying that I was being militant, the boys weren't men, they needed time to socialize, I was telling them how to raise their children, and that maybe he should call the Athletic Director and Principal and tell them (which he did). I didn't respond. I don't wrestle with pigs. Pigs like it, and I get dirty. Tough guy/girl text messages are the sign of a pig. It is a sign of a lack of courage. This Dad was never taught by his father that if you have a problem with someone or what they are doing/saying, then go talk to the person. Don't go tell the teacher. This, though, is an all too often response today by many people. They send emotional, tough-guy/girl text messages, emails, and tweets rather than speaking to the person with whom they have a problem. They lack courage.

Of greater concern is the complete lack of courage exhibited by our school administration after the father of one of our 5th grade JV Basketball players got into a verbal altercation with a senior citizen and a mother with her 5-year-old daughter during an away basketball game. The assault of the senior citizen, mother, and child by that father of one of our players was so aggressive that the mother was forced to call the police. Upon calling, the father of our player fled the scene before their arrival. After our game, our coaching staff was approached by the senior citizen, who was still visibly shaken by the event. Our school administration's response to the incident? The father and his wife were asked to re-sign our Code of Conduct (emphasis on re-sign). All parents had already signed the Code of Conduct! Our school administration's lack of courage in enforcing it not only allowed but fostered this type of abusive behavior to continue. This same father's wife would go on to scream and yell at my son during a practice, and they would both eventually verbally

assault my wife and 5-year-old daughter at another game to the extent that other families had to step in to address their aggressive threat.

Everyone remembers Winston Churchill's response to Adolf Hitler and the German war machine following the evacuation of the British and French Armies from Dunkirk; "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!" We remember the bravery of England standing alone as a bulwark to German aggression. We remember their courage. What is less well known, is that prior to Winston Churchill, England's Prime Minister was Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain's response to Adolf Hitler was that the Brits should try to appease "Herr Hitler." He thought that if England didn't get involved, Hitler would leave them alone.

Wolves are scary. Sheep want them to go away. Sheep don't do anything to merit a wolf's aggression. Sheep believe that by running away, the wolf will not attack them too. Sheep see the wolf attacking another sheep and think that that will satisfy the wolf. The wolf won't attack them so long as the sheep do nothing to the wolf. Unfortunately, they are mistaken. Wolves prey on sheep. Thankfully, there are sheepdogs. Sheepdogs are similar to wolves. They can be violent, and because they can be violent, they make sheep nervous. But there is one major difference between the violence of a wolf and that of a sheepdog. A wolf uses violence to prey on sheep. A sheepdog uses violence to protect the sheep.

To be a sheepdog, though, you need courage. Remember, "Principal, CEO, Head Coach, Director, and Captain" are titles. Titles don't make you a leader. A leader ensures their team accomplishes the mission and always takes care of their teammates. To do so will require courage. Physical courage to stand up to the wolves if the wolf physically threatens the sheep. Moral and emotional courage to know that they may have to fight the wolves with little or no support (most Americans fail to remember that England fought Germany for years before America came to their assistance, and only after America was attacked).

My wife and I teach our son and daughter the importance of courage. We define courage as doing the right thing at the cost of personal hardship. Courage is not the absence of fear but rather the opposite. Without fear, there is no courage. Courage is doing the right thing when you must sacrifice. For your actions to be courageous, of course you will be scared. And yet, you still do the right thing anyway.

We must always "take the high road." We should never wrestle with pigs (or wolves in pig clothing). The pigs like it, and we get dirty. However, taking the high road and holding the wolves accountable need not be mutually exclusive. Taking the high road and holding people accountable are the actions of a sheepdog. It takes courage. Many don't want to create waves, to get involved, are afraid of retaliation, just want to move on, hope the wolf will leave them alone. They won't. It takes courage to confront the wolf. I try to instill it in the athletes I am privileged to coach, and the organizations with whom we work. My wife and I are trying to do the same as we raise our son and daughter.

My hope is that we would all do so.

Attack!

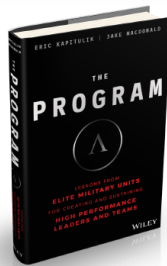


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