

THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

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- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #95 -



Left: Cooper and Jon Bleakley, Uwharrie Trailhead, 2018. Right, Isaac and Jon Bleakley, Appalachian Trail, 2023.

“I want to finish today, Dad!”

The Uwharrie Trail is a forty-mile-long trail in the mountains of central North Carolina. My thirteen-year-old son, Cooper, and I had been hiking twenty-five miles of it for two days. Our original plan was to hike for three. Cooper had already pushed us to go further than we had planned on the first day. Now, he wanted to finish the entire hike a day ahead of schedule. He was carrying a heavy pack (i.e., he took too much gear with him for the trip), making the hike even more challenging. This was his “Bleakley Bar Mitzvah,” a welcome-to-manhood challenge I would also accomplish later with my two younger sons, each when they turned thirteen. Their reward? A hatchet with their name carved into the handle. My reward? Pride. Connection. Lactic acid buildup. Aches.

We finished in two days. I was impressed and proud of Cooper. Sitting on a log at the trailhead enjoying a much-needed drink of water, I asked him, “Why did you want to push so hard to finish in two days?” I was sure he would say, “Because I wanted to be tough and show you how much I could do.”

Cooper instead replied, “I rented Thor on Netflix, and I haven’t finished watching it. The rental runs out tonight. If we don’t get home, I won’t be able to finish it...”

Fast forward five years later, and Cooper’s younger brother, Isaac, and I hiked a 32-mile section of the Appalachian Trail together. Isaac knew the story of Cooper’s Bar Mitzvah and Cooper’s motivation for finishing fast (Thor). Isaac knew that Cooper had pushed us to go further and faster than planned. Isaac wanted to do the same. He wanted to do more than Cooper. Isaac pushed us to make Clingman’s Dome on our first day and return on the second, a day faster than planned, just like Cooper had five years earlier. Isaac, like Cooper before him, was carrying too much gear. With 5,000 feet of elevation gained and lost, he wanted to brag that his challenge was more difficult than his brother’s. His motivation was different than Cooper’s, but the outcome was the same. Success. Mission Accomplished.

As leaders, we must understand that members of our team will have different motivations. It is important for us to know what motivates our teams. This leads to a more effective, higher-performing team. It also leads to greater understanding, trust, and an ability for greater empathy during the trials and tribulations every team experiences in a challenging environment. It affords us not only a higher-performing team but a happy one, too. Regardless of the battlefield, be it a college athlete, professional athlete, or corporate America, teammates can enter the transfer portal, ask to be traded, break their contract, or quit. Knowing what motivates our athletes or corporate teammates does not guarantee they won’t leave the team, but not knowing might ensure they will, unnecessarily and to the detriment of the entire organization.

I failed to know Cooper’s motivation. Our third son, Jack, will attack his Bleakley Bar Mitzvah very soon. We plan to hike the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim. What’s his motivation? I think I know it. I will ask him to ensure it. Our team will be better off if I do so.

I challenge you to do the same.

Attack!

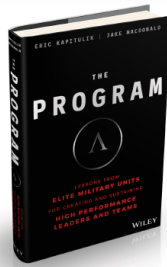
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