

Leadership Lessons from Mom

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Another Mother's Day is here, and I can't help reflect upon how much my mom has been a source for my leadership growth over the years. From that statement you might conclude that my mom has held a formal leadership position or management job. Nothing could be further from the truth.

My mom, Stavroula Givray, rigorously studied music while growing up in Greece and was on track to become a concert pianist when she graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in Athens. But at age 22 she married my dad and over the next two years gave birth to my brother and me. At that point, she put her dreams of a career in music on hold to raise her two sons.

Mom was 31 and I was 6 when my family immigrated to the United States in 1960. She didn't speak a word of English. To help support the family, she leveraged the sewing skills she had developed as a child and began doing custom seamstress work. For 15 years she delivered high-quality, creative solutions to what were often challenging and seemingly impossible sewing tasks. Then in 1976, Mom began teaching piano. Demand for her instruction grew quickly as word spread of her unique method and special ability to motivate and inspire children.

Today, Mom is a nationally recognized piano teacher whose students consistently take top honors in local, state and national competitions. She has accomplished all of this while facing diabetes and high blood pressure for most of her adult life. Recently, she also successfully battled advanced-stage breast cancer.

I've often thought about Mom's instinctive actions and decisions, and the leadership lessons she unknowingly imparted to me. To this day, when I tell her this she looks at me with surprise. Here are five of those lessons:

A LEADER OFFERS HOPE. When I was 15, I was diagnosed with cancer. Doctors said there was little chance I would survive beyond nine months. My father and brother could barely contain their despair and would often cry in front of me. But my mom, always smiling and in good cheer, would continually reference the future. Although I did not think about it at the time, seeing my mom "up" bolstered my

spirits and gave me hope and strength. Without a doubt, my mom's abiding optimism had a profound impact on my recovery. Years later I found out that late at night she would go somewhere in the house and — with a picture of her mother by her side — break down and weep uncontrollably.

Reflecting on my mom's actions when I was ill, I learned that during trying times a leader's optimism and courage lift spirits, give hope, and build strength in others.

HEARING THE UNHEARD INSPIRES TRUST AND CONFIDENCE.

When I was growing up, my mom always had an uncanny ability to listen deeply not only to what my brother and I would tell her but also to what we were not saying. Despite the fact my brother and I were often unlikely to communicate our feelings to her, my mom worked hard to tune in and always managed to know when we were troubled, confused, or pained about something. I am sure part of this ability was instinctive. But I am also sure it took discipline in order for her to put it into day-to-day practice. As a result of her ability to tune in, she was able to be proactively responsive and

attentive to our needs and concerns. That ability, coupled with her gentle and caring approach, created a safe and trusting environment for my brother and me. Later on I witnessed my mom practicing this with her piano students. No wonder she has been so successful in bringing out the best in young people.

A leader who hears concerns and hopes left unsaid inspires trust and confidence and is able to meet the true needs of others.

CELEBRATING SMALL WINS LEADS TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF BIG ONES.

When I became captain of the safety patrols in sixth grade, my mom celebrated as if I had become President of the United States. When I placed fifth in a state track and field event in eighth grade, she cheered as if I had won an Olympic gold medal. When I earned a good grade on a paper or test in school, my mom would rejoice as if I had won the Pulitzer or Nobel Prize. I am exaggerating a bit, but not much! My mom instinctively knew that by celebrating small achievements, she was building confidence, self-esteem, and the courage to take risks. She never falsely built me up by inventing or exaggerating achievements, but she always





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encouraged the positive. Mom taught me that celebrating small wins emboldens you to achieve big ones.

Through celebratory events and positive reinforcement, leaders build confidence, spotlight desired outcomes, boost morale, and help others envision what is possible.

LEADING IS TEACHING. My mom never managed a group of people or an organization. As a pianist and seamstress, she would be considered an individual contributor versus a manager. Certainly, examples abound of great individual contributors such as scientists, musicians and athletes. Great individual contributors, however, don’t necessarily make great, or even good, teachers. But great leaders need to be great teachers. As an athlete earlier in his career, Phil Jackson was an individual contributor. Later, of course, he became one of the most successful coaches in NBA history. That is because he has what famed author and teacher Noel Tichy refers to as a “teachable point of view,” the ability to teach ideas, impart values and make decisions — those that are simple, and those that are complex. Likewise, as both a mother and a piano teacher, my mom taught important life lessons and imparted values by making great decisions about how to engage her sons and her students. Mom did not use a “classroom” approach to teach, but instead continuously searched for ways to advocate, counsel, reinforce and guide. Her methods were sometimes serious, sometimes fun, often subtle, but always very effective.

By teaching others, a leader empowers them to grow and stimulates their continuous improvement.

LEADERSHIP IS DEFINED BY CHARACTER. One of world’s most renowned authorities on leadership, Warren Bennis, states: “The leader’s character is made up of a tripod of forces: ambition and drive; competence and expertise; integrity and moral fabric. All three are needed, and all three have to be in balance, or the tripod topples.” I remember reading Bennis’ words years ago and thinking about my mom’s determination, her relentless commitment to do her best, and her unwavering chosen values. When she was young, she was determined to excel as a pianist, devoting 8 to 12 hours per day to study and practice while her friends played. As a mother, she was determined to create a better future for her sons even though it meant leaving her

family and living in a foreign land. Though being a seamstress was a distant second choice to what she really loved, she developed an expertise that was the marvel of her clientele. When she finally reconnected with music, she faced numerous obstacles including relearning many technical skills, creating her own teaching methodology, and — perhaps most difficult — having to communicate in a language in which she had no formal education. She prevailed and today is revered by her peers, cherished by her students and deeply valued by their parents. Throughout, her foundation has been her unfaltering set of values, which include dedication, kindness, nurturing, gentleness, patience, loyalty, a strong work ethic, genuine caring, and unconditional and boundless love for her family.

Leaders who combine determination and a commitment to excel while remaining true to their core values earn the trust, loyalty, confidence and respect of others. They also create faithful and enthusiastic followers.

In my judgment, my mom’s greatest accomplishment is the lasting influence she has had on others. Her selfless devotion, boundless patience, gentle guidance, unfaltering values, and unconditional love have taught, influenced, comforted, healed, and strengthened so many people. In the end, isn’t making a meaningful and enduring difference in the lives of people by inspiring and enabling them to do great work, make valuable contributions, and reach their utmost potential what leadership is all about? •

Henry S. Givray is Chairman of the Board of Directors of SmithBucklin, the association management and services company more organizations turn to than any other. He served as SmithBucklin President & CEO from 2002 to 2015. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and top national news media. Henry has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings and educational forums that were attended by diverse audiences. Recognizing that growing leaders from within is essential to an organization’s enduring success and vitality, Henry created and facilitates two intensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The SmithBucklin Leadership Learning Forum is a nine-month program for top performing employees at various levels within the company. The SmithBucklin Leadership Institute is a six-month experience for board members of SmithBucklin client associations.