CEO MOM: LEADERSHIP LESSONS I’VE LEARNED BY BEING A CAREGIVER

By Tina DeLaCruz
Client Services Associate
The Village Business Institute

Many of us who are caregivers probably don’t think of ourselves as leaders. We are parents caring for our kids; we are adults caring for our aging parents; we are nurses caring for our patients. It’s just what we do, who we are. It may be our job, our responsibility, or our passion (or all three). Being a divorced mother of two daughters, I am their caregiver, but I am also the leader of a single-parent household.

It seems like a weird idea when I say it out loud: I am the leader of my home. However when I start thinking about it, there are countless tasks that I handle on a daily basis that someone in a leadership role within an organization would be responsible to complete.

Things like: budgeting and forecasting (A single mom financing a child’s once-in-a-lifetime school trip to Europe? I better be good at budgeting or get good at it fast!), training (I am preparing them to live on their own one day; I better show them how to cook something and do laundry), research and development (I don’t know about you, but my kids haven’t stopped asking me questions since they learned how to ASK questions), and project management (How are we coming on the room-cleaning situation? What resources can I help you obtain to be successful – a vacuum, a garbage bag?).

All joking aside, there are many other skills and much more knowledge caregivers use to get through life that show their leadership qualities every day. If any of you have had an aging loved one file for Medicare, you know the level of skill and attention to detail it takes to navigate the paperwork involved. Not to mention the paperwork necessary to file for a leave of absence if you are to be the primary caregiver for that person. As a caregiver,
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especially to those who care primarily for our aging parents and grandparents, it is important to make their lives more pleasant and joyful.

My grandmother, like many other elderly adults in long-term care facilities, struggles at times with depression due to the loss of freedom and ability to care for herself. I am the fourth generation of a line of strong, resilient, and resourceful Mexican American women (of course there are more before my great-grandmother but none that I knew personally). When I was a child, my grandmother was probably one of, if not the strongest, women I knew. Not just in a physical sense – she was a force. She stayed home full time and raised seven children while my grandfather worked. She took care of the whole household. She took care of us grandkids all summer long. She was good, kind, loving, and fair, but it was not a good idea to cross her – not that I ever did. She was (and is) a leader in my eyes.

Inevitably time wears on us all, and it wears on some of us faster and crueler than others. My grandmother is still a force, still as good, kind, and loving as ever. But her body is no longer capable of doing the things it once did. Now it is her daughters’ (and to some degree, my) turn to step up and be her caregivers; to use those leadership qualities she imparted on us over our lives to bring her some peace in her time of struggle.

I have seen my mother and aunt exhausted from trying to coordinate her medical care, trying to cover every detail always with the utmost care. Watching them go through this experience and seeing the staff working together to reach their goals for her care coordination and long-term arrangements, I have witnessed over and over the leadership abilities many caregivers naturally exhibit: hard work, integrity, compassion, empathy, commitment, and inspiration just to name a few.

It has been my experience that many caregivers naturally exhibit these leadership qualities and use them every day; whether it’s a charge nurse and her cohorts or a single mom raising her daughters, I see these traits on display. Because caregiving isn’t just about the direct physical care involved; it is that plus all the hundreds of details that go into taking care of that person (or in my case, persons). All the medical forms that need completing, the scheduling of appointments, the running to buy dance tights or dress shoes or skates, keeping track of practices and concerts and competitions, and all the millions of other things that go unnoticed to keep the household “organization” running smoothly.

Seeing myself in this way, as CEO of my house, I found myself wondering: am I being a good leader to my “team members”? There is a card I bought years ago with a phrase that always struck me on a deep level. It is credited to a Cadet Maxim from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point: “Risk more than others think is safe. Care more than others think is wise. Dream more than others think is practical. Expect more than others think is possible.” It has been sort of my life motto, I suppose. So I wonder – if the best leadership is to lead by example, am I striving for excellence in my own life? Am I doing my best to develop and encourage them to take risks and dream big? Am I teaching them to care about things even if they don’t get something directly in return?

I will paraphrase a quote I read recently. It said that managers tell people to do things; leaders inspire people to do things. As a caregiver, I certainly hope that I inspire my daughters to become great caregivers and leaders in their own right. Although if someone can figure out how to get a 12-year-old inspired enough to do dishes, please let me know how you did it.
By Shawn Doyle

I travel around the country conducting leadership development programs for corporations. Sometimes, I’m working with people who are in development programs and want to be managers. Other times, I’m working with people who are already in a leadership role.

As the author of two books on leadership, the biggest question that comes up most often, and is often the topic of debate, is about the difference between leadership and management. I’m often asked if there is a difference between a manager and a leader, and if that difference really matters. Yes! It matters a great deal.

In order to be successful and have the chance to move into greater roles of responsibility, leading becomes much more important than managing. However, I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s first define the differences between leadership and management.

Warren Bennis, an author and leadership expert, best articulated the distinctions that can be made between the two: “The manager administers; the leader innovates. The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective. The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why. The manager has his eye on the bottom line; the leader has his eye on the horizon. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.”

I explain the differences in another way. Managers manage things (budgets, resources, inventory, etc.), while a leader leads people. In order to be successful, you have to be both a manager and a leader. In a leadership role, you can’t ignore the bottom line or not manage the P & L. The problem is that most people in leadership roles spend the majority of their time and efforts managing and almost none of their time leading. In order to make sure you aren’t one of them, here are five important questions to consider:

1. **Where is your time being spent?** Many of the leaders I meet around the country are spending their time on administrative work, meetings, budgets, and other operational issues. They are very busy people and very involved with all of the things that challenge the daily lives of leaders. It is not easy. When I ask them how much time they spend coaching, developing their team, and meeting one-on-one with team members, the answer is often, “Hmmm, that is a good question,” which means that they aren’t spending nearly enough time leading.

Here is an exercise that will shed light on the subject. Take a piece of paper and make a list of all your weekly activities. Next to each one, write the amount of time it consumes. If it is a management activity, (managing things, budgets, resources, operations) label it with an M. If it is a leadership activity, (people related), label it with an L. The majority of leaders in my classes are shocked at how much time they are managing (90-95%) and how little time they are leading. Most haven’t given it a minute of thought. Managers spend more time managing things; leaders spend time with people.

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2. Do you know your people? “Well, of course I know my people,” you say. “What a ridiculous question.” Sure, you know their names and their backgrounds, their histories, and where they live. Here is the bigger question: do you really know them? Do you know what they want? Do you know their strengths and weaknesses? Are you coaching them to get better? Do you know what their short-, mid-, and long-term career goals are as of today? Are you meeting one on one with each team member on a regular basis to coach them on their individual development plans?

If you hesitate one minute when answering these questions, then the simple answer is that you have been managing them, not leading them. Sorry! The good news is that you can start now, today. Start giving them what they want, once you know what it is. Managers know their people in a shallow way, but leaders really know them.

3. Do you ask or tell? An employee comes to your office with a problem or a challenge. She explains the whole scenario. You have two choices:

1) Tell her what to do, and then ask what questions she may have about your solution, or …

2) Ask her what she thinks are possible solutions and which would work best. Ask, “Why do you think this is an issue?” and, “What do you suggest we do?”

When managing people, you want them to get it done, whatever “it” might be. When leading people, you are coaching them to arrive at solutions through their own thinking so they can be more productive in the future. This is the long-term thinking approach that Bennis is talking about.

In the long run, this approach saves time; team members don’t need to run to you for every solution. I have seen leaders who have a deli-style line outside their office every morning with team members who need problems solved. That’s a manager, not a leader. They’re feeding their egos with the desire to be needed. Managers tell while leaders ask, ask, ask.

4. Are you an innovator? Do you ask your team to be innovative and creative in arriving at solutions? Have you ever said to the team, “Let’s start over. What if there were no rules? What would be a potential solution?” Have you ever brainstormed with the team? Do you encourage and reward innovative, different thinking?

If your answer to these questions is “no,” it’s time to stop and reevaluate. There is an unlimited amount of brain power on the team that is waiting to be unleashed. The problem is that, currently, you’re not fostering it, or, worse, not allowing it by saying things like, “We haven’t ever done that before,” or “That’s outside our normal standard of operation.” You are killing the ideas in your people before they are allowed to live. Managers kill innovation; leaders cultivate it.

5. Are you delegating? Are you assigning tasks to the team? Most managers don’t, usually because they feel that it’s their job or that others couldn’t do it as well as they could. Well, yeah, it’s your job, but it doesn’t mean you can’t delegate a task on occasion. And no, they can’t do it as well as you can, which is the point! You want them to learn by doing the delegated task.

 Managers never delegate unless they have to. Leaders delegate strategically. They delegate a task for a reason, with thought and planning. The purpose may be to teach a skill, boost self-esteem, reward performance, or train for future opportunities, to name a few.

Employees have been directed all of their lives by managers–some dumb, and some smart. I believe that most employees have reported to managers in their career but have never had the privilege of working with a true leader–someone who inspires, educates, communicates with, and motivates them.

This is what your team members are looking for. They crave great leadership. When they find it, there will be a massive increase in productivity, morale, and employee retention. So, when you go into the office tomorrow, will you go in as a manager or a leader?

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