

April 2023

*Paying it Forward
Leading with Purpose
with Chief Randy R. Bruegman, (Ret)*

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Doing the Right Thing is Hard

If it's hard, it's the right thing to do.

No matter what position you hold in your organization, have you noticed that there are times when doing the right thing is hard?

Telling someone they may have inadvertently offended you by a comment, that you felt that they mistreated a fellow colleague, or that a fellow employee didn't do their best work on a report can often push you outside of your comfort zone. You have probably found yourself in this situation on many occasions.

The late Norman Schwarzkopf stated: "The truth of the matter is that you always know the right thing to do. The hard part is doing it." I have definitely found that to be true in my career. I remember when I was first promoted to Battalion Chief; this is the field command officer responsible for leading and managing company officers, and they have several fire and emergency stations assigned to their command.

My first test of doing the right thing even though it was hard was with the very company officer that I had worked with for several years, who was a mentor of mine. In fact, he helped me prepare to take the Battalion Chief's test. He had a run-in with a resident and didn't handle the situation appropriately; a complaint had been made, landing on my desk. I had to take care of it.

You can imagine the thoughts going through my mind, and the consternation of having to address this situation with the very person for which I had so much admiration and respect. I could have easily followed up with the citizen who made the complaint and told them it was handled and let it go, but that was not the right thing to do. Someone once told me that, if you wish to be a true leader, you will not do the wrong thing just to be liked or because it's comfortable. A true leader knows that it takes character and courage to do the right thing, and doing the right thing is the only way to earn the true respect of the people you are leading.

As I sat down with my mentor and former boss, now my subordinate, I talked through



the issue, explained what my expectation was and that he had violated policy and would be given a written reprimand, I also explained that this type of behavior would not occur in the future if he wished to remain in his position.

You might imagine how difficult that discussion was. I was expecting that, at the end of that conversation, our friendship would likely be over. But the opposite was true! He just stood up, smiled, and said, “You have met my expectation as a leader.

Had you done anything less, I would have been disappointed in you.”

You can probably now guess who it was who told me, “If you wish to be a true leader, you will not do the wrong thing just to be liked or because it is comfortable. A true leader knows that it takes character and courage to do the right thing, and doing the right thing is the only way to earn the true respect of the people you are leading.” Yes, it was my mentor and my former Company Officer!

As I progressed through my career and became Fire Chief, I saw that the challenges became much more significant, and the outcomes that I had to decide on become life-changing for the people involved. You will find this to be true as you move up in your own profession; the challenges faced will become more complex, and the ramifications for the individuals involved and for the organization can be profound. When you have to terminate or reassign an employee to a lower level position, it can one of the most difficult tasks a leader has to perform. I know it was for me. You think about the impact on their families, and what the long-term impacts may have on their career and personal life. But when you make those decisions, you do so through the lens of what is important for your organization in respect to your culture, what is right for the people that you serve, your ethics, and your expectations of performance. This will bring clarity to your decision process.

No matter what your position in your organization, you will be faced with situations that will test your ethics, and you will be forced to make decisions or engage in discussions that take you out of your comfort

zone. But if you hope to be successful in your career path and move up in your organization, you have to be willing to do the right thing, even when it is hard.

I remember when I was growing up, President John F. Kennedy gave a speech on lunar exploration known as “the moon speech.” During that period, in the early 60’s, America was in a difficult time regarding civil rights. Tensions were high with Russia. Many Americans felt that the country was at a standstill due to the post-war economy in respect to the rest of the world.



KENNEDY AT RICE UNIVERSITY, 1962

Kennedy’s speech was a great example of a leader who understood that, to be a good one, you must commit to doing the hard things. It gave hope to the American

*A time for moral
LEADERSHIP*



KENNEDY
for PRESIDENT

people and, in my opinion, invigorated and instilled the thought that, if the country and the people within it wish to be successful, we all must tackle the hard things. In his speech at Rice University, he stated:

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too. [...] And, therefore, as we set sail we ask God's blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.” (September 1962)

While Kennedy had established the goal of going to the moon in a speech to Congress in May the previous year, his Moonshot speech is great example of a leader setting a clear, ambitious objective with a defined timeline and motivating people to get it done, and for all to tackle the hard things to make the country better.

When Leaders Don't Do the Hard Things, They're Not Leading

One does not have to look far today to find leaders in all professions who avoid making those tough calls. When you kick the can down the road on a tough decision, it never gets easier to make. In fact, the decisions often get more complicated and much harder to solve.

In society today, we have so many examples of leaders not doing what is hard, it would be difficult to choose the top ten. The federal budget, the homelessness issues, immigration, the fentanyl crisis, climate change, the lack of robust north American rail service, lack of water infrastructure in many states, border control, gun-violence, and the dysfunctionality of our political systems are some examples. Take a moment to list your top ten. What is the common denominator of why we are not addressing such issues?

I believe it is leaders who won't do the hard things. In Texas they call that "Big Hat, No Cattle." Or, a person that is full of big talk but lacks the courage and the actions to actually get anything done. We see this daily in political environments, where getting things done means you have to do the hard things, collaborate with others, and actually focus on the issue that you are trying to address; not just trying to make the other political party look bad. But this also happens in businesses large and small, in private and public organizations and even in your own home.

The reality is, if you don't address the issue today, it will only grow and become more difficult to solve in the future. As you look at your top ten list, what actions need to be taken to deal with the problem? Are there any on your list that are your responsibility? If so, why have you not addressed them? If they fall under someone else's purview, what are the ramifications for your organization if they are not addressed, and how can you help to resolve it?

Chief B's Key Leadership Takeaways

Having the honor of speaking to great leaders in their profession in **The Leadership Crucible Podcast**, we make notes on the key leadership takeaways that are discussed. Will share those with you in hopes that it help you to reflect on your own leadership style, but also to provide some potential talking points that you can discuss with your team. Doing so is a great way to understand your teams, gain perspective on topics, helps you to gain a deeper understanding of how your individual team members think. It is an excellent way to build you team.

- ✓ If you think not addressing the difficult issues in your organization will endear you to your employees, it won't. They will see you as a weak leader.
- ✓ Failure to address the hard issue today will only make the eventual decision that much more difficult- and more painful. Do the right thing!
- ✓ Don't tolerate entitlement at any level, it is a fatal disease of any organization.

- ✓ Doing the right thing, even when it is hard, builds the values of the organization and the leader. It is the cornerstone to building a strong foundation for both.
- ✓ Don't sugarcoat the hard issues you or the organization are dealing with. Honesty builds trust, encourages peoples to be open to discussing the issues, and get people involved to help solve it, especially if it is a company or organization-wide issue.
- ✓ Doing hard things will help you to build a culture of accountability, trust, and build a fellowship among your team.
- ✓ Don't fail to address poor performance because you like someone or because they are a top producer in your organization. It will make others call into question your integrity and undermine your culture.
- ✓ The path to doing the right thing is often not easy, but it will always maintain your integrity and set you on a course to do what is right for the people that your serve and your organization.

Bonus Leadership Takeaways: Insight from Marshall Levin

Marshall Levin's professional reputation spans the globe and includes senior positions in both the profit and non-profit sector. Mr. Levin is an honors graduate of Swarthmore College. He holds a Master of Social Service from Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research.

He was the Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science, where upon his departure, they created an educational endowment fund in his name.

A Senior Associate National Director and Director of National Development for the Anti-Defamation League, Mr. Levin served as Executive Director of Financial Resource Development for UJA-Federation of New York; Executive Director of Community Planning & Allocations for The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore; Supervisor of Northern Israel in charge of Crisis Intervention for the Ministry of Social Welfare; Lecturer at the Haifa University School of Social Work; and Executive Director of synagogues in the Conservative and Reform movements.

Marshall was also a professional athlete.

Leadership Insight from my Interview with Marshall Levin:

I was the executive director of a synagogue in suburban Washington, DC in the early 80's, and a march there was requested by the Ku Klux Klan in Lafayette Park. The permit was turned down and so there was great upset among members of the Klan that they didn't get the chance to voice their hatred.

The KKK chose our synagogue, which has white walls around the outside, to do seven-foot-tall murals in red spray paint enamel with slogans of the Waffen SS: a German combat unit of World War II responsible for enforcing the racial policies of Nazi Germany. The writing was on the outside walls, such as, "take a shower Jew" on the nursery school door, and the Steel Eagle Swastika emblem. This was done under the cover of darkness while we were in the synagogue having a board meeting that ended at eleven at night. Nobody heard anything. One member of our board was a member of the CIA, which I knew, but no one else did. He left the board meeting at eleven that night and went out to his car, which was not parked in the parking lot, but parked on the side street. His car was the only car spray painted with a swastika and the entire car was defaced with anti-semitic graffiti. He came back into my office.

"Can I get a secure line? I think I have been exposed." I gave him a secure line and then I went outside with our custodian, and I don't know

what made me do it, but I said, I think there has to be more. By the way, there was a full parking lot of cars with the lights shining on them, but no other car was defaced. So, I walked around the building with the Custodian. He had his flashlight, as no outside lights were on, and we uncovered, one by one, these slogans. It was frightening, and appalling.

I didn't mention, it was election eve, and at six AM the next morning we were a polling place. So, I knew that when the sun came up that the news cameras would be there. This would be the billboard of hate for Washington, which in fact, it did become. But I said then, this was a crime against the community, not just a crime against the synagogue. The city's advice at the time was that, if this kind of defacement happens, you should call this sandblasting company to come out in the middle of the night and have it remove it. They did not want undue publicity.

The board president and I made a unilateral decision not to take it down, but to use this effacement to highlight an atrocious act, and to ask the media to cover the story. We asked the community to come on Sunday to help us wipe clean this hatred act and they did. Led by the children of the community, we were going to take scrub brushes and buckets and were going to manually take down the symbols of hate with the help of the community. And so, we issued the invitation. On that Sunday a thousand people came. It was broadcast throughout the U.S., in Paris, in Russia, all over the world. It created a new model of response.

I believe that true leadership is about honoring the history of those who came before us. It is about living in the present moment, and in this case, history happened to us. It was our job to use it to help shape the future. We initiated a civil suit against the perpetrators and asked for help, and people contributed to a legal fund. A criminal case was also filed, and the leader of the group did three years in prison for it. Since it was a crime against property, rather than a crime against a person and under the legal statutes, there had never been for a hundred years any prison sentence for someone who had defaced a building and a religious institution. So, this case set a legal precedent. The civil case actually went to the Supreme Court and was upheld.



**Marshall
Levin**

As Marshall and I discussed, the threats to him and his family during this time were constant. The courage that Marshall displayed during this difficult period in his life was a true testament to doing the right thing, knowing that it was going to be extremely hard. This case actually helped to codify the Civil Rights Act.



Readers are Leaders

I believe that, to be a good leader, one must be on a continuous quest to gain more knowledge. The leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. John Coleman's article in the Harvard Business Review, "For Those Who Want To Lead, Read," highlights that the leadership benefits of reading are wide-ranging. Evidence suggests that reading can improve intelligence and lead to innovation and insight, and, for example, some studies have shown that reading makes you smarter through "a larger vocabulary and more world knowledge in addition to the abstract reasoning skills."

Reading has many benefits, but it is underappreciated as an essential component of leadership development. To that end, we'll provide a few suggested titles for you to consider reading.

Doing the Right Thing:

Cultivating Your Moral Intelligence

by Dr. Aaron Hass

Doing The Right Thing:

Twelve Portraits in Moral Courage

by Tom Cooper

***Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can
Change Your Life... And Maybe the World***

by Admiral William H. McRaven

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