

**Empower Teachers, Transform the World**

Submission for Peter Drucker Essay Challenge

By Misti Burmeister

©August 15, 2010

## **Empower Teachers, Transform the World**

Big and realistic change happens every day in classrooms across the nation and the world. Behind every successful businessperson, artist and entrepreneur stands a teacher who inspired and believed in the impressionable child that person was and gave him or her the confidence to be great. Yet, even though most people acknowledge the power of a good teacher's influence, our current educational system struggles. For every child who is inspired, many more drop out, tune out or simply slip through the cracks. Giving teachers the leadership tools necessary to inspire confidence in our youth is one of the most effective and proactive avenues of realistic and lasting change available to our society.

### **School of Deep Ditches**

Were it not for a few good, inspiring teachers who were also effective leaders, I would have been another casualty of the education system.

With three older siblings and alcoholic parents, life at home rarely made sense. My earliest memories include skipping second grade. Spending my days literally roaming around ditches with my older brother was just more appealing than school, no matter what the consequences might be when we got home. While I recall little of what I learned in school, I do remember being asked to read aloud in class. It was always a horrifying experience, frequently resulting in harsh comments from classmates and my teacher.

“Ditching” school eventually led to getting suspended from school, mainly for my misguided efforts to gain attention. When one teacher tried to touch me, I warned her that my return touch would be much harder. She did it anyway. I hit her, earning a one-way

ticket to the special education class. With one fell swoop, I went from learning algebra to being reminded that one plus one equals two. Bored out of my mind and irritated that I had been placed in the “abnormal” class, I seemed to stay out of trouble during school hours. But my enrollment in this program led to taunting, which led to more fights on the way home.

After accompanying me to several consequent court appearances, my parents moved us out of our urban neighborhood, hoping a change in scenery would change their kids. And for the most part, it did. We ended up in a very small community where kids didn’t smoke, rarely fought and weren’t promiscuous, and the closest thing to a gang was the football team. Better yet, we enrolled in a new school, one with a few angels among its faculty members.

Many of today’s children are not fortunate enough to move to a calmer area. According to a report conducted by America’s Promise Alliance (CBS, 2008), in America’s 17 largest cities, less than 50 percent of high school students graduate. Nationwide, more than a million students drop out every year, and 30 percent of all U.S. teenagers will not graduate high school. Meanwhile, the career consequences of not having a high-school degree grow more serious every day.

If we were to evaluate our schools from a business perspective, we would see a serious retention problem. When companies experience such high turnover, we suspect inadequate leadership skills. It’s time we turned our corporate savvy to our public school system and ask: How can we equip administrators and teachers with the same high-quality leadership skills we value in the business world so that good teachers stay

engaged in the classroom, leading students to emerge from school empowered with confidence and knowledge?

### **The Wisdom of Mr. Wiser**

I was fortunate to meet a true teacher-leader whose empowering influence kept me from lapsing back into old (self-destructive) habits.

I will always remember how my new high-school principal Mr. Wiser sat calmly behind his big wooden desk, his hands folded together while my mother shared about all the challenges I'd experienced and the special programs I'd been enrolled in over the past two years. Meanwhile, I shrank in my seat, waiting for him to explain what I would need to do that was different from all the other students. To my absolute shock, he simply said, "Mrs. Burmeister, I think your daughter is quite normal and will get along just fine in our regular classes."

I knew he'd heard it all, so he must have known something that neither my mom nor I knew. If he thought I would do well in his school, then I most certainly would. And while my grades were never stellar (if my homework couldn't fold up to fit in my back pocket, I didn't take it home), I did graduate and become a three-time state champion track and field.

Mr. Wiser's confidence in me changed my life. I still found many ways to get myself into trouble – in sports and in academics. But whenever it escalated to Mr. Wiser, he always insisted that the teacher or coach take greater responsibility for the success of their students. In doing so, he made me feel supported and empowered, *and* he insisted that his staff lead their students to the best of their ability.

His leadership skills and the self confidence he inspired in me saw me all the way through graduation and into the University of Northern Colorado. Many of my professors rose to the occasion when encountered with my stubborn, righteous, stressed-out, ADD/OCD self. Like Mr. Wiser, they saw (and nurtured) my potential. If it had not been for such leadership, I would not be a best-selling author and speaker on the topic of generational and personal leadership. I would not be sitting here in front of my computer asking myself, “Where do I see the biggest and most realistic opportunities for innovation and change – and where would they most be needed? How can we be successful in managing those changes?” And I would not be thanking my lucky stars for the teacher-leaders who have inspired this essay – and my life.

### **Teacher-Leaders**

Just as Peter Drucker believed “people are an organization's most valuable resource, and a manager's job is to prepare and free people to perform,” I believe *we* are our most valuable resource. The vast majority of students struggle to tap into the power of their minds, because it’s difficult in our fast-paced, ADD-riddled society to quiet our brains enough to do so. Our youth and our world need teachers with the courage and ability to provide a safe space for young people to explore the many facets of their thoughts and dreams and to lead students inward to discover their strengths. Without this empowering leadership, our young people risk never knowing their true worth and potential.

This is why we see them turning to violence, food, media and other self-destructive addictions and behavior at an alarming rate. Students Against Destructive

Decisions (2007) gathered statistics from the NIH and CDC, putting numbers around the hopelessness felt by our teens as it manifests in their behavior and life choices. Fifteen percent of girls and 14 percent of boys are obese. Thirty-one percent of girls become pregnant before the age of 20, and 80 percent of these pregnancies are unintended. According to the Office of Applied Studies (2010), each day sees more than one million teens smoking and more than 500,000 drinking, usually binge drinking. *Current Psychiatry* (2010) reports that one in five teens entertain suicidal thoughts, and incidences of self-harming practices like cutting are on the rise.

For the transformative change needed to heal teenage hopelessness, we need leaders like Mr. Wisner, leaders who can stay focused on the vision and overcome the hurdles to make it a reality. We need teachers who know who they are, believe in themselves and can create a space where others can learn to believe in themselves. Imagine the kinds of students we'd produce if all (or even most) of our teachers had strong self-esteem, remained present with their students and provided the support necessary for success in life. Imagine the ripple effect with the parents of those children, the co-workers of those parents and the leaders within our largest companies.

I agree with Dr. Drucker, who once said:

Teaching *is* the only major occupation of man for which we have not yet developed tools that make an average person capable of competence and performance. In teaching we rely on the "naturals," the ones who somehow know how to teach.

But we cannot rely solely on the rare natural teachers, not if we want to institute a shift in our world. With the proper leadership model training, we can help every teacher find their own unique ways of empowering students, just like Mr. Wiser did for me.

I believe it is possible to provide our teachers with the *best* leadership training, the same quality of leadership and personal-development training that professionals at Harvard Business School or in *Fortune* 500 C-suites get. I'd love to watch as my tax dollars go toward helping teachers learn about themselves, develop the compassion necessary to help troubled students (like me) and provide the tools essential to ensure every student knows his or her value in the world. The training provided by these institutions produces results through group coaching and one-on-one coaching. Emerging leaders learn about themselves and, as a result, become better equipped to lead their team members to discover what makes them exceptional. Providing all teachers such world-class leadership training – including listening, coaching skills and meditation training – will strengthen our collective self esteem as they inspire and empower the future leaders of our government, businesses and nonprofit organizations.

Practical resources for teacher-leadership training would include elements designed to foster self knowledge. This might include: a 360-assessment (to be completed with feedback from the teachers, their colleagues and their students), Myers-Briggs testing, coaching sessions to explain the results, year-long personal-development plans, 12 group-coaching sessions throughout the year and six personal-development books of their choice to read throughout the year. Finally, all teachers would have access to a personal- or leadership-development coach throughout their careers.

Once teachers have garnered self knowledge and self esteem from leadership training, compassion, patience and passion will follow naturally. In order to treat me with the compassion so crucial to my development, Mr. Wiser had to let go of any expectations about how I *should* behave, what I *should* like, what I *should* know or what I *should* do. Being able to release the “right” and “wrong” conversations in order to simply listen and engage a student in a productive way requires a high level of self awareness and confidence.

Giving teachers the same concrete leadership tools we give our CEOs will transform their work in the classroom. High-quality leadership training will arm our teachers with a strong understanding of self so they can help our students get to know and appreciate *themselves*. Rather than eating, drinking, smoking or any other self-defeating behavior, students will have the self confidence to make better choices and own responsibility for the results. The ripple-down effect of this is massive with potential to create the sustainable, healthy culture our communities yearn to achieve.

### **Successful Teachers, Successful Communities**

Just because we don't pay our youth to learn doesn't mean we should forget how valuable their performance (or at least their ability to perform when inspired or motivated) is to the success of our communities. They are our future leaders, and we must treat them as such, investing the same resources in them as any company would in its rising stars.

My teenage nephew, Jack, attends a public school in Colorado where he is on the brink of becoming an accepted casualty, rather than a valued member, of his community.



His teachers do not see his potential, and his need for true leadership is unmet. Unlike a growing percentage of our youth, Jack is not on medication to be controlled or tranquilized into submission. And yet, for lack of self knowledge (and therefore an inability to see *him* clearly), his teachers dismiss him as a “bad kid.” The effects of this are devastating. Jack is beginning to harm himself, make bad life decisions and alternate between arrogance and self loathing.

While we may not ordinarily think of self knowledge, compassion or empathy as essential components to leading people of various backgrounds, they are of the utmost importance. When we give teachers the opportunity and tools to learn about themselves, what we’ll end up with are young adults ready for the challenges of entrepreneurship, leadership and stewardship.

Perhaps the most famous teacher of all time, Socrates championed self knowledge as the key to wisdom. He proclaimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and declared this examination the starting point for all arts, sciences and politics. His leadership inspired the youth of Athens, and one young Athenian named Plato became the father of Western philosophy and established the world’s first academy of education. Today we need a Socrates in every boardroom, classroom and principal’s office.

### **Mini-CEOs of the Classroom**

The most successful CEOs create a culture of sustainability in their organizations. Our communities desperately need to cultivate this same sustainable culture, ensuring healthy, happy neighborhoods, towns and cities up to facing and transforming today’s

challenges. Successful organizations incorporate leadership training as an essential component of building a culture designed to stand the test of time.

Over time, leadership training for teachers will produce, in essence, mini-CEOs of our classrooms – teachers who are completely committed to their vision (both personal and organizational) and to ensuring that each student has what they need to succeed in school and in life. Rather than becoming irritated with students who act out, they will confront such situations with compassion and real interest in students of all different cultures, temperaments, personal histories and personality types. The ability to demonstrate such compassion with authenticity is what saved my life, one that could very easily have gone an entirely different direction.

While I doubt Mr. Wiser had any formal leadership training, he had something in common with Socrates – a vision for the long-term success of his students. Before his influence, I trusted no one (myself included). Mr. Wiser remained focused on helping me find some sense of peace, be it through a connection to sports, a safe place to share my stories or words of praise. And at the end of the day, once my need was met, he always insisted that I go back to the classroom to learn.

Good CEOs are committed to the mission of the organization and the future promise represented in its staff. Because of this commitment, they present a variety of challenges to their team, provide the resources needed for success and pay close attention to the natural talents of each team member. They illuminate each individual's talents by putting people into positions that play to their strengths. Rather than saying, "You need to become an analytical, numbers-driven person," a great leader will say, "You seem to

perform best when dealing with people, synthesizing data and seeing the big picture, so let's find a role in which you can use these traits to shine.”

Helping students find their unique/authentic fit in the world becomes possible when teachers are able to embrace differences, rather than enforce standards. Then everyone shines, and our schools become places of innovation, celebration and excellence. When teachers are able to own full responsibility for the success of their students, they will find creative ways to help their students, rather than shipping them off to special programs that keep them out of their sight. Rather than turning their heads or throwing up their hands in frustration when a child is in need, these self-actualized teachers will embrace troubled children, helping them discover solutions to their problems and create their own success.

When students have a safe place to explore who they are and find creative solutions to their problems, our nation will begin building the foundation for empowerment. Those who feel empowered *and* self aware stand a much greater chance for successfully creating breakthrough ideas. When a student messes up, as inevitably happens on the way to any breakthrough, good teacher-leaders will see it as a teaching opportunity. Whether it's in academics, sports or other extra-curricular activities, teacher-leaders will help students understand and deal with feelings of failure without losing the passion to keep going. As a result, students keep trying because they learn to trust themselves.

When students know and trust in themselves, they feel less of a need to escape reality through distractions (like TV) or even more self-destructive practices (like self-mutilation or overeating). When they feel empowered to find creative ways of handling

the variety of situations they are expected to deal with (like drug abuse, gangs or peer pressure), they will naturally implement the strategies they have learned to stay on track.

Cultivating true teacher-leaders will create walking, talking, teaching self-confidence machines. Today's youth are aching for someone to recognize their worth and bring out the best in them. Our world is aching for the youth to recognize their worth. We need them to stop roaming around in ditches and instead know that they are capable of climbing mountains to reach the peaks of their potential. Teachers who can lead the way from the depths to the heights are our guides to not only healthier happier youth, but to a better future for our country.

## References

Big Cities Battle Dismal Graduation Rates (2008, April 1). Retrieved August 5, 2010 from <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/04/01/national/main3985714.shtml>

A Day in the Life of American Adolescents: A Substance Use Facts Update (2010, April 29). Office of Applied Studies. Retrieved August 5, 2010 from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k10/185/185TypicalDay.htm>

Peterson, J, Adam Coles and Stacy Freedenthal (2010, August). Adolescents who self-harm: How to protect them from themselves. *Current Psychiatry*, 9(8). Retrieved August 5, 2010 from [http://www.currentpsychiatry.com/article\\_pages.asp?aid=8835](http://www.currentpsychiatry.com/article_pages.asp?aid=8835)

Students Against Destructive Decisions – Statistics (2007, February). Retrieved August 5, 2010 from <http://www.sadd.org/stats.htm>