A Powerful Lesson In Leadership From My Mother-In-Law (Seriously)

Steven M. Gfell, Mr., Bowling Green State University - Main Campus
A Powerful Lesson In Leadership From My Mother-In-Law (Seriously)

Feb 5, 2015 | 699 | 11 | 10 | LinkedIn Facebook Google+ Twitter

Now before I get too far into this, I need to clarify that this isn’t a “make-up” article that tries to atone for some past misdeed. I didn’t have too many drinks and make a
spectacle of myself at a recent family engagement. And no, I didn’t get into a heated argument with my wife about whose mother is the better cook. I didn’t even bad mouth my in-laws in front of a crowd (not that they know about anyway). I am not trying to pad my inheritance or schmooze my way into a “Son-In-Law of the Year” nomination either. Nor is this article a clumsy attempt to smooch someone’s rear end to get back into their good graces (it’s far too late for that). So now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, I just want you to read this article for what it is: the God’s honest truth about someone I admire the hell out of.

The Fight Against Cancer

A year and a half ago, my mother-in-law Shelley Killen was diagnosed with breast cancer. During this time, she waged a courageous and quiet battle against the most vicious and relentless of enemies. She fought with dignity and an unwavering spirit--refusing to give one inch. Even in the darkest times, she always had a smile on her face. It was a bitter struggle that was set to come to an end last Thursday--her last chemotherapy treatment. This was the day that she was to be declared cancer free. Yeah, that’s right. Remission. It was going to be a glorious day.
That’s my wife on the right. I am totally overchicked.

However, something happened on Monday that made all of this instantaneously irrelevant. During what was thought to be a perfunctory visit with her oncologist, Shelley shared that over the last month, she had been bothered by persistent, intense headaches. As a precautionary measure, she was given a CAT scan to rule out any impediments to her final chemotherapy treatment. Although this was supposed to be a rubber stamp, cancer had other plans. Lurking in her brain for the last few months, four malignant tumors used this opportunity to declare themselves a force to be reckoned with.

As you can imagine, this has had a traumatic, gut-wrenching effect on our entire family.
We have all gone from the mountain top of elation (my in-laws were planning to go on vacation minutes after the final treatment) to the rocky valley floor below in a matter of hours. And I'd like to tell you that things are going to be just fine, and she'll get through this okay. But I'd be lying. Because I don't know. I really don't know. And no matter how many people she talks to or how many doctors she sees, none of us have the faintest idea how this thing is going to play out. But there is one thing I do know for certain. I know that for an hour on Super Bowl Sunday--staring down the barrel of her own mortality--Shelley Killen put on a display of leadership that would rival any battlefield general, world leader or big time athletic coach.

My youngest son Zach signing a banner for Grandma. Her former employer, St. John's Jesuit High School, presented it to her before a football game last fall.

Barbeque and Bad News

Lured by the promise of free brisket and pulled pork (I am a total sucker for that), my in-laws invited the immediate family over to their house under the guise of “quality time.” Now I'll never be mistaken for a NASA engineer or a charter member of...
MENSA, but I knew that something was up. It was tense. Really tense. You've all been there--uneasy small talk, people looking at their watches and counting down the minutes until the inevitable. I sat quietly waiting for the bomb to drop. And after three plates of hickory-smoked goodness, it did. No sooner did I wipe the barbeque sauce off my chin, and we were whisked away to the dining room table to talk about “options.” I wasn't entirely sure what “options” we would be discussing, but judging by the edginess in the room, I was fairly certain that it wasn't going to be my choices for dessert.

And so we all sat down to talk about what might become of this whole situation: treatment, timelines, hospitals, doctors, and even end-of-life care. All the cards were on the table. It was a hot mess of emotion, love and strategy. It was sad. It was nerve-wracking. It was uplifting. But most of all, it was masterful.

**Textbook Leadership**

As a guy in pursuit of a doctorate in Leadership Studies, I am well acquainted with a myriad of leadership traits, theories and behaviors. I try to cultivate them in my personal and professional lives, look for them in other leaders, and foster them in those that I lead. I am a leadership junkie. Frankly, I thought I knew a lot about leadership, and out of nowhere, this frail, frightened woman took me to school.

This family meeting was so remarkable because it hit on so many of the things that I consider to be the gospel truths of leadership. In fact, I drove home in silence because the experience had such a profound impact on me. I couldn't speak. I just kept thinking to myself, “Did that really happen?” In the most difficult of situations from the unlikeliest of person, this meeting about “options” turned into living, breathing chapters from some of my favorite books.

**Great Leaders Are Courageous**

The best leaders show courage--in good times and in bad. It can take many forms: from running back into a burning tower on 9/11 to save a stranger, or waging an unpopular Civil War to abolish “a moral, social and political evil,” or by simply saying “no” when asked to give up your seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Situations like these wobble knees, moisten brows and churn even the most iron-clad
of stomachs. Shelley was no exception. It was clear that she was scared to death, but in order to keep her family from unraveling, she put on a brave face and laid out a plan for dealing with her new reality. She set the example, and whether she knew it or not, we all found strength in her unwavering bravery.

Great Leaders Show Humility

So many leadership studies talk about the importance of humility. One of the many unwritten codes of the Marine Corps—“Officers eat last”—exemplifies this. From first lieutenant to general, Marines understand that the burden of leadership requires sacrifice and putting the needs of others first. So when Marine officers are in the mess hall, the enlisted soldiers go to the front of the line. Whatever is left over, goes to the officers. If there is nothing left, the officers don’t eat. Although Shelley was never a Marine, her approach was no different. Yes, the meeting was about her, but at no point was it ever “about” her. In fact, it was clear early on that the meeting was really about us. She put her fears and ego aside and faced the gravity of the situation so that we could have some clarity and peace. Yes, her health was important, but she viewed our emotional needs as more important than her own.
Great Leaders Have A Fierce Resolve

Great leaders also have a fierce resolve to see things through to completion. They show an unrivaled determination to execute their vision. Things may get tough, and people may doubt, but those at the helm never veer off course. I know this all too well about Shelley. I have seen this resolve in the form of her piercing brown eyes. Yes, they have been trained on me more than a few times (if you can imagine a look that simultaneously says, “I respect your opinion” but “We’re doing it my way,” you’ve pretty much got it covered). My mother-in-law has an iron will. And she runs things. Period. My father-in-law puts on a pretty good show, but we all know the deal.

In the event that we had forgotten this, we were quickly reminded of it. This summer, my wife’s brother is getting married, and in light of the situation, I really think people were wavering on this. That lasted roughly ten seconds. Regarding this matter, Shelley made three things incredibly clear: 1) There will be a wedding this summer, 2) We will all be there, and 3) We will all have fun (regardless of whether she is with us or not). These items were non-negotiable. They were edicts, and they were followed by, “If you don’t, I will haunt you from the grave.” Yes, she really said that, and I don’t know about everybody else, but I believed her. I really did. Why? Because she was hellbent on the fact that her illness was not going to cast a shadow over her son’s wedding.

Even the brutality of chemo couldn’t keep Shelley from going to watch her beloved Irish in South Bend.
Great Leaders Inspire Others To Act

Real leaders inspire others to act--plain and simple. This has been true from King Leonidas all the way to Mother Theresa. These people move others to be the best they can be. They motivate people to act on their behalf--not out of fear or obligation but out of respect and love. Shelley was no different. In a matter of minutes we were all taking out our phones, checking calendars and coordinating transportation, doctor’s appointments and phone calls. Out of nowhere I even offered to do maintenance around my in-law’s house (What?!?) I also volunteered to be the enforcer of any “last wishes” (anybody that isn’t having fun at Matt’s wedding now has to answer to me). But that’s what happens with great leadership. It inspires people to be better than they are. It inspires people to follow and support their leader.
One Thing Is Certain

We still don’t know what the future holds for Shelley. The family is still in the process of getting other opinions and exploring a variety of treatments. What I do know is that she has set a great example for my wife, my children and me. I mean, come on! I just wrote 1,500 words singing the praises of my mother-in-law. If that isn’t leadership, I don’t know what is! And what I also know is that regardless of what happens, she has made all of us better people, and that is the mark of a true leader.

Written by

Steve Gfell
8 posts

Add your comment...

T.J. Hunt 1st
Route Manager at Waste Management
I pray she continues to have such great strength & leadership. Thanks for a great read. God bless!

Like  Reply  2 months ago
Hiring the right people is critical for any business. Bringing in the wrong person not only wastes time and money, it also creates a ripple of negativity that impacts every other employee -- and therefore the business.

So why, when you're the perfect candidate, do companies still not hire you? Here are five reasons they end up hiring the wrong candidate:
1. They ignore what matters most.

Every employee has to follow company rules and guidelines, whether formal or unwritten. Still, some people can't... or just won't. And often that's okay.

If you're a skilled engineer with an incredible track record of designing new products -- and who also berates support and admin staffers -- you won't immediately turn over a new interpersonal leaf just because you got hired. Or if you're a programmer who only works *Selene* hours as if you'll melt in sunlight, you won't magically transform into a standard-issue 9-to-5er.

For some people, the work, and how they perform that work, is what matters most -- not the job. *And yet they can still be perfect for the job.*

Smart companies decide to accept the total package and all that comes with it. If they desperately need engineering skills they could decide to live with a proven engineering superstar's diva behavior. In the same way, letting a vampire-style programmer work nights may be fine even if everyone else works normal hours and communication will be less than optimal.

Smart companies assume that if compromises need to be made, they will make them -- because ultimately they want superstars... warts and all.

I'll take a somewhat high maintenance superstar over a mediocre but easy going employee any day.

2. They hire for skills and totally ignore attitude.

Skills and knowledge are worthless when they aren't put to use. Experience, no matter how vast, is useless when it is not shared with others.

Think of it this way: The smaller your business the more likely you are to be an expert in your field; transferring those skills to others is relatively easy. But you can't train enthusiasm, a solid work ethic, and great interpersonal skills -- and those traits can matter a lot more than any skills a candidate brings.
According to one study, only 11% of the new hires that failed in the first 18 months failed due to deficiencies in technical skills. The vast majority failed due to problems with motivation, willingness to be coached, temperament, and emotional intelligence.

Smart companies hire for attitude. They know they can train almost any skill but it's nearly impossible to train attitude. They see the candidate who lacks certain hard skills as a cause for concern... but they wisely see the candidate who lacks interpersonal skills and enthusiasm as a giant red flag.

3. They automatically hire friends and family.

Sure, some successful businesses look like an ongoing family reunion.

Still, smart companies are careful. Some employees will naturally overstate a family member’s qualifications when they make a recommendation. The employee's heart may be in the right place, but their desire to help out a family member doesn't always align with a company's need to hire great employees.

Plus friends and family see each other outside of work, too, increasing the chances of interpersonal conflicts. In extreme cases, especially in small businesses, the workplace turns into an episode of Survivor: three relatives working in a six-person business may end up wielding more effective power than the owner.

Some companies set up an appropriate policy, like "no family members in the same department." Smart companies simply do an incredibly thorough job of evaluating the candidate -- that way they know when to say no.

4. They ignore gut feel.

Nothing beats a formal, comprehensive hiring process -- except, sometimes, a little dose of gut feel and intuition.

Smart companies weigh impressions against qualitative considerations. And they feel free to run little "tests." I always took supervisor candidates on a tour of our manufacturing areas. Sometimes an employee would stop me to ask a question. I
always took the time to get involved because employee needs always come first. Any candidate -- especially a managerial candidate -- who seemed irritated or frustrated by the interruption was a definite cause for concern.

The same was true if an employee was struggling to keep up on a production line. I naturally pitched in while still talking to the candidate. Most job seekers also pitched in, some self-consciously in an obvious attempt to impress, others naturally and without affect. (It's easy to tell the people who automatically help out from those who do so only because you are watching.)

Smart companies know the intangible qualities they want in their employees, and figure out simple ways to see if a candidate has those qualities.

Candidates like you.

6. They take the wrong chance.

There are two kinds of chances you can take on a potential employee.

There are the good chances: taking a shot on a candidate you feel has more potential than her previous employer let her show; taking a shot on a candidate who has few of the skills but all of the attitude; taking a chance on a candidate you feel certain brings the enthusiasm, drive, and spirit your team desperately needs -- those are good chances to take.

Then there are the bad chances: the candidate with a history of attendance problems who you hope will suddenly develop a strong work ethic; the candidate who left each of his last three jobs within weeks because "all my bosses were jerks;" the candidate who has no experience in your industry and only wants to talk about how quickly and often she can get promoted.

Why do companies take bad chances? They're desperate. Or lazy. Or have "better things to do." Or figure a bad apple won't spoil the bunch for very long because turnover rates are already high.
Smart companies know that matter how hard they try, everyone makes hiring mistakes. So they don't take bad chances -- those almost always turn out poorly.

Plus they know good chances often turn out to be their most inspired hires -- and their best employees.

*Like you.*

Now it's your turn: why didn't you get a job (it's happened to all of us) even though you were the perfect candidate?

I also write for Inc.com:

- 5 Questions Great Job Candidates Ask
- 10 Things Extraordinary Bosses Give Employees
- 14 Strange, Unusual Interview Questions CEOs Ask
- One Interview Question That Reveals a Superstar Job Candidate
- 7 Things Great Bosses Never Ask Employees to Do

Check out my book of personal and professional advice, *TransForm: Dramatically Improve Your Career, Business, Relationships, and Life -- One Simple Step At a Time.* (PDF version here, Kindle version here, Nook version here.)

If after 10 minutes you don't find at least 5 things you can do to make your life better I'll refund your money.

*That way you have nothing to lose... and everything to gain.*