



A Leader Emerges

Skills and Professional Development



“I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way,” sings the incomparable Whitney Houston on the 1985 song “The Greatest Love of All.”

As often as these words are repeated, how often do we believe them? More importantly, how often do we live them? Looking forward, are we equipping the next generation with the skills and experiences necessary to become the trusted leaders of the future?

I’ve been wondering how well the next generation has been trained for leadership. After a recent conversation with one of my nephews, Donovan, I think we’re on the right track.

This summer, Donovan spent a great deal of time learning about, studying, and practicing leadership principles. It is enlightening to talk with young people about their life philosophies, especially when they have yet to really live and their philosophies are simply — philosophical.

Donovan recently began his sophomore year of high school in Lafayette, California. Given his exposure to Boy Scout leadership, I thought it would be interesting to see what he learned this summer and how he thinks his newly acquired skills will benefit him as he approaches the new school year. Moreover, I thought there may be lessons to learn from the mind of an emerging leader.

Whitnie: Are leaders born, made, or do they emerge?

Donovan: I don’t think that leaders are born. There is no biological reason that one person can be a leader and others can’t. I think leaders are created. Maybe it’s the environment they live in that gives one an advantage. It’s really the circumstances that determine who becomes a leader; therefore, anyone can become one.

Whitnie: What is your leadership philosophy?

Donovan: In my mind, leaders are simply people who want better for the group. They are the people who have the drive to make things better for others.

Whitnie: What are the traits, characteristics, and values you like in leaders?

Donovan: I prefer a leader who takes the time to paint a picture of the goal and inspires me to want to do the work necessary to accomplish it. Someone who makes the team's work fun, even if the work itself is not.

Whitnie: What kind of leader are you?

Donovan: My best traits as a leader are that I am fun and carefree, but I can get down to business and lead a group quickly. Unfortunately, there are times when I can be too carefree.

Whitnie: If you could send a message to other emerging leaders, what would you say to them?

Donovan: Leaders should find the proper balance between establishing credibility, pushing to get tasks accomplished, and appealing to the emotions of the team. You need to reach a consensus and make sure you have a common understanding that will help to increase productivity.

Whitnie: If you could send a message to established leaders, what would you say to them?

Donovan: Don't take sides or show your bias. Suppose there is a riff between team members and you have to find a way to help them resolve it. The worst thing you can do is not to listen to both sides. This destroys team dynamics and causes members to not want to listen anymore, which can further complicate communication.

Whitnie: What did you learn about leadership this summer?

Donovan: Influence is key, particularly with colleagues that you don't have real authority over.

Whitnie: What is the best advice you've gotten about leadership? How will you use this to develop your leadership skills and/or to lead others?

Donovan: Most of the camps I've been to have involved other Boy Scouts. It is harder to establish credibility in a group of others who have similar experiences and abilities. You have to be able to distinguish yourself in order to gain their trust. It is possible but it takes time and energy.

As much as I generally enjoy talking about leadership, I especially enjoyed this conversation with Donovan. Despite the divide that the media portrays between the generations, Donovan understands that leadership is still about relationships. He is aware that leadership takes time and energy. It's not just about handing over the reins and not working toward desired outcomes. If Donovan is indicative of our future leadership, I believe that we are in good hands.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the Lead the Way column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.