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Bye Bye Birdie

Career Development



There comes a time in the life of every parent and leader when those we've been charged with protecting, nurturing and preparing for the next step have to strike out on their own. It is not an easy transition, but for the health of both the preparer and the prepared, it has to be done. Once we've gotten over the feelings of being left behind, unwanted or unneeded, we can understand more fully exactly what our role was.

I recently wrote about a friend I'd worked with and mentored for over a decade who took a position for which we'd been preparing him for some time. It was definitely a bittersweet experience knowing we would no longer work together on a daily basis, but the feeling of pride I had in seeing him achieve something he'd wanted and worked so hard for washed the sadness away. He is successfully serving in his new role and already making a mark for himself. Our mentor/mentee relationship hasn't dissipated; it is strengthened because he is in transition and facing new challenges.

A few weeks ago, I was a little late to my running group's 4:30 a.m. stair training workout. As I was jogging up to the facility with a couple of others, we noticed the ladies who were on time had already started their workout. One of my running companions mentioned the fact that they had started without my being there and that was the mark of a good leader. It was a perspective I hadn't thought of in a while, but one that made me beam with pride that this group that I had helped build didn't need me and that it was safe, secure and thriving on its own.

As leaders we have the option of holding onto knowledge, power and incentives and let what happens with our followers end with us. Or we can choose to share and leave a legacy by building a self-sustaining group or team that highlights or reinforces not that we once held the power, but that we taught, mentored and empowered those who followed us to be great, and to be leaders in their

own right.

As a follower, one of the things that I have appreciated from my leaders was their willingness to invest in me, trust in my abilities, and then turn me loose to do what I was capable of doing and seeing that as a better reflection of their power and influence than feeling a need to regulate every action I took as a way of showing they were in control. While everyone is not a self-starter or interested in mapping out their own destiny, a good leader will take the time to find out where their followers are and where they want to go, and then work with them to move them from Point A to Point B. When you are working with more than one or two people, this is admittedly a challenge, but it is definitely something that distinguishes great leaders from mediocre ones or, worse yet, those who can only delegate assignments.

So what if we started with the end in mind when we are leading? This alone will make us a cut above others because one of the most difficult tasks in leading is finding the time to actually lead. We are often so consumed with getting the work done that leading is an afterthought and a luxury. Managing is not without its merits, but if leading a team resulted in getting work done more efficiently and creatively and freeing us up to do other work, isn't it worth the extra effort to get those enhanced results? What is that end we are leading toward? For every leader and follower it is different, as is the path for reaching that end. But if the end doesn't include setting the follower free to flourish and fly on his or her own, we should probably rethink it.

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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.