

# Do You Have Knowledge Where It Really Counts?

## Leadership Lessons I Learned from My Son

Follow these 10 rules and your organization will flourish.

By Michael J. Carrasco

**A**ccomplishing goals through people is what you, as a leader, do. You need to understand people to motivate them into action, and nothing prepares you like hands-on experience. You may be surprised at the ways you can gain that experience—from volunteering to mentoring to being a parent.

Granted, being a parent doesn't automatically make you a great leader. You do, however, learn some important people and communication skills.

Sure, you're the leader, but you're also part of a team.

I'm the father of three children. My oldest son has autism, a spectrum disorder diagnosed in 1 in 110 children, affecting their communication, problem-solving, and social skills. It has no cure, but proper training can help develop their communication and cognitive skills. Raising him has proven insightful and rewarding and taught me lessons about both life and leadership. Below are some of these lessons:

### 1. Know Where You're Going.

My wife and I know our son's world. While we're not medical or education experts, we understand how autism impacts him and what

direction we want him to take as he grows. We're clear on what to advocate for and stake positions on.

**Leadership Lesson:** Making tough decisions is part of the challenge for any leader. As a decision-maker, advice will come from a variety of sources—colleagues, partners, constituents—who will make many recommendations, suggestions, and even demands. Find your compass point and stick with it. When you know where you want to take your organization, your decision-making will stay focused on what matters most.

### 2. Watch What You Say and Do.

My kids hold me accountable for everything I say. Like a lawyer during cross-examination, they remember statements and promises I made and hammer home the message:

You're not doing what you said.

**Leadership Lesson:** Never make an empty promise or threat. Once you've failed to follow through, you lose credibility. You'll be held accountable for your statements by your board, staff, constituencies, and the public, so be prepared to do what you say.

### 3. Yes—Everything Is Always Your Fault.

It's a fact of life for any parent. At some point your kids are going to blame you when things don't go

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their way. It doesn't matter if you can control events or not. As the parent you're the biggest target for them to vent their anger at.

**Leadership Lesson:** People will disagree with you, sometimes very publicly with hostile statements, smear campaigns, or even lawsuits. Understand that as the leader you represent your organization, and take the blows gracefully.

### 4. Don't Argue in Public.

My wife and I know we need to display a united front. We always reach a common stance before meeting with school officials about our kids. Doing so makes us a strong presence.

**Leadership Lesson:** Sure, you're the leader, but you're also part of a team, working toward common goals. Even if there's a difference of opinion, make sure you, your staff, and your board speak as one mind when in public. Airing dirty laundry undermines everyone's credibility and taints your organization's reputation.

### 5. Transitions Are Hard.

Our oldest son's day is structured. He hates any break in his routine, even if it's a pleasant one such as summer vacation. My wife and I prepare him for the upcoming break by talking him through what he's going to be doing during the summer.

**Leadership Lesson:** Change is upsetting and produces great resistance, especially if you don't consult with people. The worst thing you can do is keep people in the dark about what, when, how, and why something is going to happen.

Recognizing that leaders have a shelf life will extend your organization's growth and development.

That goes for good as well as bad news.

### 6. Measure Performance.

Once a year my wife and I sit down with my son's education-plan team, made up of various school personnel, to review current performance levels and determine future goals—both academic and life-skill-oriented. We take care that these goals are realistic and specific and that we can monitor, document, and assess them.

**Leadership Lesson:** Measuring performance keeps the motivation going as you move in a solid direction. Are your programs still relevant to the organization's mission? Does your staff team have the cohesiveness and know-how to take your organization where it needs to go? Focus on identifying strengths and weaknesses and building them.

### 7. Accountability Helps Everyone.

I hold all my children accountable for their actions. Positive actions get rewarded. Negative actions require a timeout and discussion of what happened.

**Leadership Lesson:** As leader, you need to recognize both great and poor performers and create an environment where everyone can learn from mistakes and continue to develop. Such an atmosphere motivates and inspires people. Accountability helps everyone—staff and board members—be more creative, innovative, and committed to meeting performance expectations.

### 8. Stay Connected With Key People.

My wife and I try to connect with some school officials away from the professional setting. They're people too, not just titles. They have their own stresses, and sometimes

the best thing we can do is just listen. From the moment my son walked into the school system, I've befriended many people whose advice I've come to rely upon.

**Leadership Lesson:** Cultivating relationships is the key to success. Doing so takes time and effort but offers uncountable benefits.

### 9. Yes, You Have a Shelf Life.

Okay, so I don't have a "Sell By" date stamped on my forehead. Still, I know there'll come a time when I'll no longer have a direct influence over my children. They'll be building their own lives and making independent decisions.

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**Leadership Lesson:** Although leadership is a constant, the situation requiring leadership varies. Some leaders are skilled at starting organizations, building them, and growing them. Some have a talent for running established organizations, bringing their seasoned judgment and steady hand. Some are turn-around leaders who revive failing organizations, while others are adept at directing an organization's final performance, bringing its days to an end. Leadership requires a variety of skills at different stages of an organization's development. Recognizing that leaders have a shelf life will extend your organization's growth and development.

### 10. Everyone's Good at Something.

My son is a ferocious reader but has trouble interacting with people. A teacher of his developed a book-buddies program, bringing my son together with non-disabled children to read and interact, helping him develop much-needed social skills. In fact, my son met a non-disabled little girl with whom he continues to be friends to this day.

**Leadership Lesson:** People want to contribute to your success. Help them bring out their strengths, and make sure you're capitalizing on all their talents.

### Remember the Final Secret.

As a leader you're helping to develop a sustainable community, bringing in people who want to contribute to that goal. Those who want to help you can also make your job harder with resistance, reactions, or perceptions which can be unpredictable. Listen well. Communicate clearly, early, and often. Understand your team so that you can lead others to achieve your goals. ■

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