

TIP #19 – JUNE 2007
FACILITATING A DISCUSSION ON LEGACY
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Are you on this planet to do something, or are you here just for something to do? If you're on this planet to do something, then what is it? What difference will you make? What will be your legacy?

We pose these questions to first-year students in our leadership classes at Santa Clara University. It's pretty heady stuff for eighteen-year-olds barely three months out of high school. Even most adults haven't thought seriously about these questions. We don't expect our students to have ready responses. We just believe that they ought to be thinking about what their legacies will be—not only as they begin their college careers, but throughout their lives.

“What will be your legacy?” does not have a single, right answer. It's not a math problem with an established formula. But asking the question opens our students to the notion that in somewhere in their life's journey, they are going to be struggling with determining the difference they want to make, with doing things that matter. They are going to be making choices at school, work, home, and in the community. Every choice they make will be part of the legacy they leave, however consciously or unconsciously they behave.

Asking the question about legacy brings forward another central observation: leadership is not solely about producing results. That is, success in leadership is not measured only in numbers. Being a leader brings with it a responsibility to do something of significance that makes families, communities, work organizations, nations, and the world better places than they are today. Not all these things can be quantified.

Our own studies, as well as those of many other authors and scholars who have explored leadership, have shown that leadership often begins with pain and suffering (our own and in the conditions of others). Our colleague Patrick Lencioni, the author of several best-selling books, told us that when he graduated from college he “wanted to change the world. Call it what you will, I was determined to make a difference.” However, the problem with this zeal, he went on to explain, was that he hadn't thought deeply enough about two fundamental matters: “Who am I really serving? And am I ready to suffer?”

Here are a few other questions that might help to trigger thoughts about legacy.

- What will be your greatest contributions to your family?
- What will be your greatest contributions to your friends?
- What will be your greatest contributions to those you've led?
- What will be your greatest contributions to your organization?
- What will be your greatest contributions to your community?

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