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What Learning to Cook Taught Me About Great Leaders

"If we do what comes naturally, we will not be great leaders."

That's a quote from an upcoming podcast guest, Hans Finzel (check out Episode 24 in about two months). No one is a naturally great leader. By default, we all have characteristics that prohibit us from being great leaders.

Shyness, self-centeredness, inability to handle conflict, reluctance to speak up, not listening to others' ideas. The list could go on and on. No one is just born with all of the traits necessary to lead others. So how then do great leaders evolve? I think I learned that lesson a long time ago, but just realized it.

When I was five years old, I began to learn how to cook. Not peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, mind you. I'm talking about chicken and dumplings, lamb chops, pork tenderloins with cherry horseradish glaze, you name it.

I was blessed to learn two very different styles of cooking. My mom's mother cooked traditional southern cuisine (mmmm...cornbread) while my dad's mother taught me the art of gourmet cooking.

By the rules

When I first started learning to cook, I had to follow the rules. That meant that I had to mix the cherry horseradish sauce exactly according to the book (the book being whatever my grandmothers told me). I still remember it today:

- 1 cup of cherries, crushed
- 1/4 cup of apple cider
- 2 teaspoons of sugar
- 2 tablespoons of horseradish
- Cornstarch to thicken

The only area where I got to "experiment" or play it by ear was with the cornstarch. It always seemed to require a different amount based on the juiciness of the cherries.

I learned to cook *by the rules*

Changing behavior and learning to lead

Rules are particularly helpful when learning something new, like leadership. They are helpful when learning to break a bad habit or establish a new one.

When I was suddenly thrust into a leadership position eight years ago, I had no book to follow. I had no rules. I made it up as I went along. Needless to say, that was a disaster.

But I began using certain self-imposed rules to define the desired behaviors I wanted to present as a leader.

Here are some examples:

Rule: Today, I will not speak for at least five seconds after someone presents an idea.

The purpose of this rule was to learn to keep my mouth shut when someone presented an idea I didn't like or I thought was "stupid."

I had a habit of shooting down ideas way too quickly and as a result, I stifled my team's creativity.

So I made a rule for myself that all I would do is keep my mouth shut for five seconds after someone gave an idea. It felt like an eternity, but it kept me from shooting it down.

Rule: Today, I will keep my door open at least four hours.

I was proud of my "open door policy." That meant I was a great leader, right?

Not exactly. What my policy really meant was "if Matt's door is open, he is available." Only one problem...I never kept it open. Don't judge me...I was young...and raised by wolves (kidding, Mom).

So I set a rule that I would keep my door open for four hours per day. And yes, I tracked it.

This quickly resulted in much more communication with my team.

Rule: Today, I will catch one team member doing something right and say something about it.

By setting this rule, I forced myself to look for positive things my team was doing. And when I found them doing something right, I made a big deal out of it.

Often, while working on this rule, I found myself at 5:00pm not having done this and had to scramble, but over time, it became a habit.

Rules become habits

If you've been married, you know that rules usually become habits. Many spouses are surprised to learn that their other half loads the dishwasher a certain way or likes his or her toilet paper on the roll in a specific way.

Why? Because that's how they did it in their house growing up. The rule was you loaded it a certain way, so it became a habit.

Rules become habits. Habits become the foundation of great leaders.

The freedom to experiment

No great chef follows the rulebook. Great chefs are great because they experiment with variations to the rules.

Great leaders don't become great because they follow a recipe, either. But rules are necessary to break bad habits and establish the foundational habits of great leaders.

As I progressed as a cook, my grandmothers gave me more freedom to experiment. By age seven, I was tweaking the recipes. By age nine, I was creating my own meals from scratch.

Some of them were disasters, but more often than not, we found a better or just different way to make something.

Over time, you will find the same thing in your leadership journey. What feels like a legalistic rule today will soon become a habit. And before you know it, you'll change it up a bit.

You'll be able to relax and shoot more from the hip. You'll step more and more out of your shell and be the leader that you've been called to be.

You'll be the kind of leader that will change the world.

Oh, and in case you are wondering, I replaced the sugar in the recipe above with honey, added some ground pepper and eventually added ginger. It's pretty much awesome.

Question: What rules do you need to set for yourself to become a better leader?