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How My Kindergarten Teacher Ruined Me as a Leader...and How I Fixed It

My kindergarten teacher ruined me as a leader for nearly twenty-five years.

It's not her fault. She meant well when she told me that day that if I brought cookies to class, I must bring enough for everyone. I'd only brought a few extra for my friends.

She meant well when she essentially said, "what you do for one, you must do for all." But that is terrible leadership advice.

At an early age I learned that if I could not do for all, then I should do for none.

Why should only a few friends get to enjoy a cookie along with me when the others must suffer in salivating agony? The problem was that I could not afford, at the age of five, to buy cookies for twenty kids. I barely had enough to buy the few that I bought.

So, no one got to enjoy the extra cookies (except me). Not my friends. Not the others in class. No one.

That taught me one of the worst leadership lessons of my life. Unfortunately I carried it with me for the next twenty-five years through numerous leadership roles.

Doing for none what I could do for some

When I first took on a leadership role at the age of twenty-six, as I have documented many times, I was dramatically unqualified and unprepared.

And I still carried that ridiculous lesson from kindergarten with me.

If I could not buy cookies for everyone in the class, I could not bless anyone. If I could not do for all, I would do for none. It became ingrained in me.

If I could not take everyone to lunch each week, no one went to lunch with me.

If I didn't have the budget to get everyone a new computer, no one got one.

If I didn't have the time to hold one-on-one meetings with my entire team of fifteen people, I did them with no one, not even my top performers.

I rationalized these ridiculous decisions by saying things like:

"If I get a new computer for Joe, then Sally will hate hers. She'll be hounding me for a new one. Who knows, maybe she'll even threaten to quit." (I know, my inner thoughts were a little on the dramatic side)

"If I take Sam out to lunch this week, then Mike will feel left out. He'll begin to wonder if he's doing something wrong. He might even slip into a deep depression and..." Okay that last part was over the top, but you get the point.

I said things like, "One day we will have the budget to..."

One day we will have the money.

One day I will have the time.

One day, one day, one day.

That day may never come.

I gave up on the leader I knew I could be all because of "one day." I continued to make excuses, rationalize, and get nothing done. If everyone couldn't make progress, no one would.

What a pathetic way to lead.

Doing for some what I can't do for all

I finally changed a few years ago. I came to grips with the fact that I will never be able to do everything for everyone on my team. I will never have the budget to do everything or the time to spend with each of them that I want.

But I can do for some what I can't do for all. I have Andy Stanley to thank for the concept. He taught me that I could change my team (and the world) by helping one person at a time.

I can invest deeply in some team members' lives.

I can take one person to lunch every month.

I can do one-on-one meetings with the top performers.

I can even get one new computer every month.

Some got special training. Some got a new phone headset. Some got gifts for a job well done.

Everyone was the better for it.

Key takeaway: Don't do for none what you *can* do for some...or even one. Do what you can *when you can* to benefit or bless others.

Two Questions:

What old lessons from childhood have hurt your leadership?

What can you do for one that you can't do for all?