

Mentorship and March Madness

Leadership Lessons from the Mentee

By DANIEL J. HORGAN



This year, St. Patrick's Day was lucky and special for me. No, I was not visited by leprechauns in my dreams and I did not win a lifetime supply of Guinness either. I was fortunate to attend the NCAA men's basketball tournament first round games in Albany, NY with my best chum and law school roommate, Michael Atkins. Irish eyes were smiling on me because our UConn Huskies were sent to that region by the basketball gods matched up against Rick Pitino's Iona Gaels. The first-round game was played to a capacity and partisan UConn crowd on St. Patrick's Day. Accompanying us on the trip was our former mentee, Joey Harris from Springfield, MA (the birthplace of basketball). We met Joey while attending WNEC Law School. Joey was 12 years old and in the eighth grade. Michael volunteered to coach a local Springfield Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) basketball team and asked me to be his assistant.

Joey was a skilled player with a chip on his shoulder, which came in handy in his rough neighborhood but could be an impediment when it came to team leadership and unity. The basketball team kept Joey busy after school and lifted some burden of worry from his mother, who worked outside the home and was raising six kids. We took a special interest in Joey, recognizing his leadership potential on and off the court with the right amount of mentoring and guidance. Joey quickly responded in a positive manner to the team rules, structure, and difficult practices Coach Mike laid down. He put maximum effort in practices and followed all the rules, earning the role of captain. Joey had a knack for showing his teammates both

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by example and with his words what it would take to turn them into competitors and winners—and win we did against talented teams from Springfield and New Haven. His leadership skills developed before our eyes. Special to witness.

As Joey entered high school, Michael and I were graduating and starting our professional careers in different states, losing contact with Joey for over 20 years. Out of the blue, Joey reached out to Michael who

was practicing law in New Hampshire. He told Coach Mike how important it was to have the mentorship and support all those years ago, and how he was paying it forward by coaching youths in Springfield. Joey, the mentee, had become a mentor to kids in his community through coaching basketball and dispensing life skill advice to those youngsters. Joey had become much more than a mentor as he was the first to graduate college in his family, earning cum laude honors and then working towards his master's degree in public administration. He also raised four children and professionally advanced to the role of deputy sheriff of a county corrections facility. That is not all. He started an annual charity basketball tournament between law enforcement and community leaders called Unity in the Community Basketball Springfield Shoot Out, which benefits community development programs in the greater Springfield area. Joey's impact on the disadvantaged youth in his community encourages others to follow in his footsteps. The leadership skills he

has developed serves his career well as he continues to climb the professional ladder, never forgetting how he got to where he is. In between the games in Albany, Joey outlined his leadership philosophy, which he imparts to the men and women he supervises. He incorporated the philosophy in a catchy acronym called “CHAIR.”

CHALLENGE

Challenge your staff to do their job to the best of their abilities and not to the best of your abilities. There is a difference! They may not be capable of what you are capable of, even if you teach them. Explain what you do and why you do it to give them an understanding of your expectations. Let them know what they can expect from you and what you expect from them. If they do not meet those expectations, hold them accountable. However, accountability does not always warrant a reprimand. It simply means taking a corrective action that changes the behavior of an employee or demands growth from the employee.

HONESTY

Be upfront and straightforward with your staff; they can spot when you are being dishonest, deceptive, or evasive. Always tell your staff what they need to hear and not what you think they want to hear. This establishes you as trustworthy and respectable. If you cannot deliver your message or the organization’s message without being dishonest, then you should acknowledge your limitations and leave the assignment to someone else. The only thing worse than a supervisor or manager who is not honest with their staff is the one who pretends to be!

ADAPTABILITY

What motivates one person may not motivate the next, so you must adapt your leadership style to get the most productivity out of your staff. You cannot manage everyone the same. The most important aspect of adaptability is understanding that you will make an impres-



Michael Atkins, Joey Harris, and Daniel J. Horgan at the UConn vs. Iona NCAA men’s basketball tournament game.

sion on some, you will impact some, and you will inspire some so much it motivates them to accomplish something they never believed they were capable of.

INSPIRE

I truly believe in coaching and trying to get people to maximize their potential. As a leader, you must offer guidance and advice on being a better employee, future advancement within the organization, education, and personal issues when asked. This should be easy for a leader because you should have already set the example. Your career failures are just as important as your success, because it teaches resiliency. Do not just tell employees or mentees what to do—show them how to do it!

RESPECT

If you do not respect the effort and job your staff does, then you will fail. Let your staff make decisions and offer positive feedback or constructive criticism when necessary. Acknowledge and show appreciation for the job they do. Leaders stand out when they treat their staff with the same dignity and respect they demand themselves.

Wow! What practical words of wisdom Joey preaches to his colleagues and those lucky enough to be mentored by him. As mentors and leaders in our legal profession, we too can have a great impact on our associates, staff, organizations, and communities. We are doers. We cannot sit idly by and expect eager young associates to pick up skills and fully understand how to be successful in our profession if we do not show them the way. Our skills, knowledge, and patience are needed now more than ever. Do not let the shot clock run out before we do our part to positively impact and mentor a member of our community and profession. “Show me a successful individual and I will show you someone who had real positive influences in his or her life. I do not care what you do for a living—if you do it well, I am sure there was someone cheering you on or showing the way. A mentor.” — *Denzel Washington*

Cheers to you Joseph Harris for your inspiration and cheers to UConn who won the 2023 NCAA Men’s Basketball National Championship! ■