

Leaving a leadership legacy

In Mitch Albom's book "Tuesdays with Morrie," Morrie shares these words of wisdom: "Once you learn how to die, you learn how to live ... Everyone knows they're going to die, but no one believes it ... If we did, we would do things differently."

Albom also wrote "The Five People You Meet in Heaven" and "For One More Day." He says his books are not about death, but about life. "Death holds a mirror up to it," according to Albom, and he says it takes death to talk about what's important in life.

The dark side of leadership, the part that causes bad behavior, often emerges from our fears, and one of the strongest universal fears is the fear of death. In one of my courses, we read "Tuesdays with Morrie" in order to start the conversation about living and dying. Though most people are uncomfortable talking about death, I've discovered that learning how to talk about death, dying, grief and loss are important leadership skills. Instead of viewing death as the opposite of life, we need to see it as a part of life.

Anthony Robbins, a well-known

motivational speaker and life coach, encourages people to have "near death experiences" regularly to help them align their priorities and keep their egos in check.

A few years ago, I went through training to be a hospice volunteer. The training stressed that we are human *beings* and not human *doings*. I realized that I was not only learning how to serve others, but also being trained in leadership. Sometimes the most important thing for leaders to remember is to just be there to listen to others and not do anything. Instead of multitasking,

leaders need to be present.

If students face their fears about dying at a young age, they might live healthier lives and create better places for people to work much earlier than if they did not have this training.

Steven Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer and Pixar Animation Studios, concluded after he struggled with cancer that "death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent."

We are living in uncertain times, and change is happening more rapidly than



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ever. Employment comes and goes, and some companies that have been mainstays are disappearing. New business models are emerging, causing all kinds of losses for people. Fear and denial of death can lead to insecurities that often result in bad leadership.

In my courses and seminars, we talk about the difference between an obituary focused on achievements (doing) and a eulogy focused on character (being). In fact, participants write their eulogy as part of their leadership development plan. Though this might sound like a strange activity in a leadership course, leaders need to understand the grief process in order to help themselves and others through these uncertain times. What are often called the "soft skills" are in reality the hard skills to practice.

Being in touch with our emotions can help us be better friends and colleagues to others. As Morrie reminds us, "Know you're going to die, and be prepared for it at any time. That way you can actually be more involved in your life while you're living." □

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