

Opinion

PEOPLE@WORK

Published Wednesday January 19, 2022

My teacher mother offered lessons for leaders

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Believing in her students' potential, she taught them to 'become clock builders' and not 'time tellers'.

My mother was a school teacher who passed on suddenly at 86 years of age during the current pandemic.

As a teacher, she had positively impacted many students, and beyond that, as a person



she had endeared herself to many.

She was groomed at a time when leaders, be they teachers or those heading corporations, were educated to believe that 'command and control' were the ideal ways to discipline students in the case of teachers and employees in the case of corporations.

Both these my mother defied, and while it may not have helped in her effort to 'discipline' her students, it undoubtedly helped many of them become who they could be.

She taught Geography, and when a book of the eulogy was compiled and released in her memory, recently, by the many who valued her, the ages of those who contributed

to the richness of the compilation varied from 20 years of age (though the individual had never been formally taught by her, as she had retired even before the person was born) to those who were nudging 70 years of age.

What are some of the lessons she taught them that have been offered to me, her son, yet sadly, I did not imbibe them when I could have? Like the prophet who is not respected in his own land, her lessons escaped me too.

1. She taught many of her students that for a teacher the natural feeling was to serve before being served.

Two of her students, one who even took Geography as his subject when qualifying as a civil servant and another who set up an NGO, both of them worked to build the community around them.

2. She believed it is more important to understand another first than to be understood. A student of hers who was interned in prison for a rash act, committed in a state of depression helped him re-establish himself as a person with high values and later on became a teacher himself.

3. She taught her students to ‘become clock builders’ and not ‘time tellers’. This she did by fundamentally believing in others and their potential.

When an aunt of mine decided to set up a school my mother and she realised that they could set up a ‘tribal school’, in an area and place where paucity of education was stunting the growth of the community and from which with adequate education could emerge leaders from the community who may advance the quality of the lives of their people.

Some alumni have helped their brethren go beyond rudimentary education to become influencers and thought leaders.

4. She believed that the basic principle of trust was that ‘people want to be trusted’. When confronted with having to take stern action against an erring teacher in a school she was involved in setting up, she convinced her members on the board to promote the person as head of the institution instead. A brave act that resulted in the individual turning out to be a ‘game changer’ and then being poached by another institution to replicate his success.

5. She knew that running an institution required the dynamics of both ‘verticalization’ and ‘horizontalization’.

Verticalization needs a responsive chain of command or a functional hierarchy and horizontalization seeks a collective sharing of ideas.

So when a curriculum was being drawn up, similar to visioning in a corporate context, heads were asked to clarify what they wanted to achieve. When the vision or curriculum was made clear, the ‘how’ was evolved through dialogue with all those whose task it may have been to implement it.

The curriculum or visioning prescribed the responsibility of those who were enjoined to give direction and required those below to be responsive. Implementing turned the pyramid around and needed the implementers to take responsibility, while those who had drawn up the vision necessarily had to be responsive to what was being sought from them as support and resource.

6. She realised that trust was a feeling and a biological reaction to the environment in which one lives and works. It was her duty thus to shape that environment. When the environment was conducive to learning, she knew the response would be trust and cooperation. She also knew that if the climate were harsh and toxic, cynicism and mis-trust would prevail.

She knew and genuinely believed that compassion was not just a feeling, it was, she said ‘action’.

A colleague of hers told me my mother believed that ‘compassion is allowing the emotion we feel to ignite the fire within to act’.

Compassion, my mother seems to have known, ‘is treating others like you would want to be treated’ and that includes ‘action’.

As a mentor of mine has often told me, quoting Dr S.Radhakrishnan, ‘a teacher is not one who gives a student what he knows but one who makes the students want what he has to give.’ Whether one is a teacher or a leader in the context of an organisation, I believe the quote succinctly captures the essence of mutuality, respect for one another, humility and demonstrates true ‘servant leadership in action.’

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