

James L. Melsa

## What I Didn't Learn in Kindergarten

Over ten years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a delightful book [1] titled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*;

that book is the genesis of this article. In Fulghum's book, he outlined a rather profound philosophy of life based on the following simple ideas:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work some every day.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder.

Fulghum's philosophy addresses what one needs to do to get along in the world. It is hard to argue with any of these suggestions.

However, the world is much more demanding today. A new leadership paradigm must recognize a terrible truth: "The customer is the boss, the boss isn't the boss." The new leader must come to work each day dedicated to energizing herself and all other employees to serve customers better. Three forces, separately and in combination, are driving today's organizations deeper and deeper

into territory that most current leaders find frighteningly unfamiliar. The three forces are customers, competition, and change.

Today's customers are much better informed and have much higher expectations of their suppliers. Customers are no longer satisfied with an absence of defects but demand a presence of value. Global competitors are everywhere offering a wealth of value, and they are ready to serve every customer's need. And change is a constant! Stated in another way, "This is like a race where you run the first four laps as fast as you can—and then you gradually increase the pace" [2]. These facts can be summarized in a quote from the noted philosopher, Yogi Berra, "The future isn't what it used to be."

### THE OLD MANAGEMENT

I'd like you to think back to your kindergarten experience. My experience instilled some messages that continue to affect my life, and I'm sure your experience lingers as well. These messages include how to ask to go to the bathroom, how to stack blocks, how to sit and listen to a book being read, and so forth. I also learned to think of the teacher as the magical source of all knowledge and the ultimate person in charge of my world at school. Learning seemed finite at that time, with an expectation that it would end when school was over.

Much of this learning had to do with *compliance*—how to do what I was told. I must admit that I didn't always do particularly well in complying with the system, but that is a story for another time. Through this school experience, we learned that, for good corporate citizens or good managers,

the goal of life was to have written on their tombstones that they had never overspent a budget or broken a rule. We will do things in a certain way because it is policy; we have always done it that way.

With compliance completely mastered and deemed critically important, one derives the second article of faith of the old management style (also taught in kindergarten) that *watching is better than doing*. Watching, in a wide variety of forms, is necessary to be sure that

I am pleased to have Prof. James Melsa, emeritus dean of the Iowa State University College of Engineering, provide us with valuable advice learned during his career. In addition to his outstanding career in academia, James also spent 11 years at Tellabs, which included such roles as vice president of strategic planning and advanced technology, vice president of research and development, and vice president of strategic quality and process management.

In this fascinating article, he invites us to free ourselves from the old ways of working and adapt to the new realities of the 21st century business environment. He explains that beginning in kindergarten, leaders were taught about the importance of compliance, monitoring, and trying harder. Because of new forces driving the world today, these concepts no longer work effectively. A new style of leadership is required based on partnership, empowerment, and service. As the author advises, "what you learned in kindergarten may not be all that you need to know!"

—Arye Nehorai  
"Leadership Reflections" Editor

others in the organization are being compliant. We all learned in kindergarten that if we were “good,” or compliant, that we could get promoted to being a monitor, or watching others to be sure that they were compliant.

With watching as an activity of extraordinary value, endless staff groups and management roles were created to do it. None of these people ever produced a product or service that was of value to a customer. Watching has come close to establishing a corporate aristocracy. The watchers live in palaces far removed from the masses of workers, they vie for the favor of the king or queen in hopes of a new title, and they enjoy privileges beyond the reach or the dreams of the common workers (the doers), the ones who actually produce the product or services for which customers pay.

The final tenet of the old management approach told us that, in the event of a breakdown or failure, we should apply the Vince Lombardi rule: *just try harder*. Organizations in trouble almost always respond to the crisis by doing more of what they are already doing.

However, rather than trying harder, the correct answer may be that the job needs to be changed or even eliminated. Futility, after all, is working hard to do something well that doesn’t need to be done at all. If you don’t have the correct road map, improving performance and attitude will just get you to the wrong place faster and happier. But you will still be at the wrong place!

Our situation may be a bit like the person found crawling around on his hands and knees under a street light. When asked what he was doing, he replied that he was looking for a quarter that he had dropped. “Where did you drop it?” he was asked. “Across the street,” he replied. “Then why are you looking over here?” His answer: “The light is better!” We are behaving exactly like this when we attack the problems of today with the solutions of yesterday. We are using them because they are more familiar. We are more comfortable with them; *they worked in kindergarten*.

## THE NEW MANAGEMENT

So what should we do? Management consultant Peter Drucker [3] provided us with some valuable insight when he wrote, “every organization has to prepare for the abandonment of everything it does.” This is a pretty unequivocal statement. Drucker went on to say that every organization has to learn to ask of every process, every program, every procedure, and every policy: “if we did not do this already, would we begin it now, knowing what we now know?” And if the answer is *no*, the organization has to change. I urge you to subject everything that you do to this “Drucker test.”

In the knowledge-based society of the future, compliance, watching, and trying harder will no longer produce all the results we desire; process-orientation and systems thinking are needed. I would like to suggest today that there are some new things we need to learn. We need to learn to be leaders who empower others and who are mentors not masters. We must teach others how to be process-oriented systems thinkers, how to be life-long learners who are open to change, and how to be team players who truly listen to others.

As we begin to think about leading [4], we face a critical choice between patriarchy (or matriarchy) and partnership. Patriarchy expresses the belief that those at the top are responsible for the success of the organization and the well being of its members. There is a lot of comfort in the all-knowing patriarch—the teacher, parent, or boss—who gives the right answers; there is also little validity in this model! However, we are reluctant to let go of the belief that if we are to take care of something, then we must control it. Patriarchy believes that the way to protect animals is to put them into a zoo!

The second choice is between dependency and empowerment. Dependency rests on the belief that the people in power know what is best for others. Dependency also dictates that those above us are personally responsible for how we feel about ourselves and for how much freedom we have.

Dependency is the collusion required for patriarchy to endure. Empowerment, on the other hand, embodies the belief that the answer to the latest crisis lies within each of us; therefore, we all buckle up for the adventure. Perhaps the critical advantage of empowerment is the truth that you cannot dictate resourcefulness. If you want people to put their hearts and minds into a project, then you had better empower them. Empowerment is not the right to do as we please but the benefit of being pleased to do what is right for the customer.

Finally, the choice we must make is between service and self-interest. Both are very attractive. The fire and intensity of self-interest seems to burn all around us. At the same time, we all seek leaders that we can trust. We want leaders that are serving their institution rather than themselves.

## FOUR CHALLENGES

I would like to offer four challenges to you as you contemplate your leadership journey:

- First, make learning an ongoing part of your life. Read and actively engage in books on leadership. Those who choose not to read are no better off than those who cannot read. Learn fast and help everyone else to learn fast. In the end, learning faster than others may be the only sustainable competitive advantage.
- Second, teach reality by asking questions that help people become what they must become for their organization to thrive. As Alice in Wonderland said, “If you don’t know where you are heading, any road is as good as another.” Or in the words of Yogi Berra, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you will wind up somewhere else.”
- Third, raise expectations by asking questions that provide individuals with insight and enable them to envision what they can become. Most of us can do a great deal more than we believe. T.J. Rodgers, the founder and CEO of Cypress Semiconductor, has a very nice way

of suggesting how goals for his organization should be set: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." [5] The amazing thing is how often the impossible can be achieved with good leadership.

■ Finally, learn to really listen. Invite and encourage open dialog. The greatest lesson in life is to know that even "fools" are right sometimes. Let me tell you a story that may give you a little insight.

An old man was convinced that his wife was losing her hearing, so he decided to conduct a test. He stood in the room next to where his wife was sitting and asked, "Can you hear me?" He got no answer. He moved into the doorway of the room and repeated, "Can you hear me?" Again, he got no answer. Confident that his test was proving his point, he moved directly behind his wife and repeated for the third time, "Can you hear me?" His wife replied, "For the third time, yes, I can hear you!"

How many times have we thought that we were listening to people, but we really weren't?

As we move further into the 21st century, we look forward to an age where knowledge is the primary driver of success, the economy is worldwide, and success flows to the swift. The old Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu described the type of leader that I hope each of you will strive to be:

As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'"

The items on my list probably weren't on your kindergarten list. As the old man said when asked for directions, "If I were you, I wouldn't start from here." But this is where we must begin and it is time to get started; there will never be an earlier time. Just remember, the future isn't what it used to be, and what you learned in kindergarten may not be all that you need to know!

#### AUTHOR



**James L. Melsa** received his B.S. degree in electrical engineering from Iowa State (1960) and his M.S. (1962), and Ph.D. (1965) degrees from the University of Arizona, Tucson. He is a distinguished scholar, an award-winning educator, and a visionary corporate leader. He was dean of the Iowa State University College of Engineering from 1995 to 2004. Previously, he spent 11 years at Tellabs Inc., Lisle, Illinois. He also was on staff at the University of Notre Dame for 11 years, serving as professor and chair of the electrical engineering department. He was a faculty member at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and the University of Arizona, Tucson. He authored or coauthored 116 publications

and 12 books, including *Linear Control Systems*. He is a Fellow of the IEEE and received the IEEE Third Millennium Medal in 2000. He was president of the IEEE Control Systems Society and of Eta Kappa Nu. He has an extensive record of service to national and international groups, including the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association (current trustee), the Iowa Business Council (current deputy), and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (past member of the Board of Examiners and current member of the Board of Overseers).

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