

“No Excuses, No Regrets – Reflections on Success Across Generations”

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University of Michigan Business School
Dean’s Speaker Series
October 7, 2003

Published in Vital Speeches of the Day – January 2004

My last trip to Ann Arbor was 30 years ago when, together with four friends from Penn, I drove west looking for graduate schools. Specifically, we were in search of schools that would be just as strong academically, but offer better athletics than we had in the East. We visited Michigan, Illinois, and Northwestern and came away excited about all of them. I eventually decided on Illinois – and wouldn’t you know it – two months after I started, a big scandal erupted in the athletic department, the top guys were fired, and I endured four more years of losing teams.

In athletics and academics, I was impressed with Michigan back in the 70s, and even more today. Booz Allen recruits heavily from your b-school here, and I’m very happy to have the opportunity to talk with you this afternoon.

In preparing for the Dean’s Speaker Series, I talked with Gerry Bollman who heads MBA recruiting for our firm, to get a feel for the topics that might be of interest to you.

First, Gerry gave me recommendations on what NOT to talk about. For instance, he said to avoid “Leadership in Turbulent Times” – “we’ve been there, heard that” – too many times already. Instead, Gerry advised me to focus on practical, tangible lessons about what it takes to succeed.

As you might expect, I have my own ideas on the subject, but wanted to provide you with a broader perspective by talking to some people I admire who have achieved a fair measure of success. I asked these seasoned executives to look back and relate a piece of advice they had gotten – or wish they had gotten – early in their careers. I also reached out to the MBAs who worked for Booz Allen this past summer – and asked them to imagine their future – to “fast forward” thirty years and describe what they wanted to be doing and what they wanted to be known for.

A number of you here today responded to my e-mail and provided great insight into that question – and I sincerely thank you. Everyone’s replies were unique, but there were many recurring themes. Both young and old answered the question “what do you want to be known for” this way: to be known more for values and a positive impact on other people than for specific personal accomplishments. I found this fascinating and impressive.

Another interesting pattern was how uniformly positive the answers were. None of the executives or MBA students complained about how hard we had to work, worried that we couldn’t achieve the right balance in our lives, or said we wanted to kick back and coast later in our careers. Quite the contrary, everyone had positive ambitions for every career stage including “semi-retirement.” These focused on making a difference for business, government, communities, church, family, and in several cases, your native homelands.

There's a common saying that "no-one on their deathbed looks back and wishes they had spent more time at the office." I've always interpreted this as an expression of regret that too much time and effort had been devoted to a profession. Yet, in my albeit non-scientific sample, I didn't hear such fears or regrets – and quite honestly I don't have them myself. My family has always been very important to me – and so has my work, and play. We seasoned executives looking back and you and your MBA colleagues looking forward are largely satisfied with our life decisions and gratified at the choices and opportunities we've had, and believe we'll continue to have.

While I was reflecting on this, I saw a Booz Allen employee heading out of the office in his gym clothes – and his t-shirt proclaimed in big block letters, "No excuses. No regrets." Of course, the t-shirt was talking about fitness – it pictured a huge dumb-bell. But, it occurred to me that this sports proverb was, in fact, a powerful guidepost for success in life. "No excuses. No regrets" aptly summarizes the feelings of the senior executives and young professionals I heard from.

Distilling the common themes, I believe the key to having "no excuses and no regrets" is -- *making the most* of our effort, our relationships, and our time.

Let me talk about these in more detail – in the form of three principles:

1. All Work is honorable.
2. Wisdom knows no rank.
3. Time should be precious, but not anxious.

First, "All work is honorable."

Most of us will end up at some point in our careers in jobs that are not fulfilling, or at least for a time working on tasks that seem pretty frustrating. But, interestingly, we often learn more from those 'uninspiring' tasks – or we are watched or admired more for how we perform in them – than we might realize.

In his autobiography, *My American Journey*, Colin Powell tells this story of a summer job he had in college working at a Pepsi-Cola bottling plant. He wrote, "When I reported in, I was handed a mop, an experience that black workers had for generations. I took the mop. If that was what I had to do to earn \$65 a week (this was in the 1950s), I'd do it. I'd mop the place until it glowed in the dark. Whatever skill the job required, I soon mastered it. "It could be godawful work, as it was the day fifty cases of Pepsi bottles came crashing down from a forklift and flooded the floor with sticky soda pop.

"At the end of the summer, the foreman said, "Kid, you mop pretty good." "You gave me plenty of opportunity to learn," I told him. "Come back next summer, he said, "I'll have a job for you." Not behind a mop, I said. I wanted to work on the bottling machine. "And the next year, that is where he put me. By the end of the summer, I was deputy shift leader and had learned a valuable lesson: *All work is honorable. Always do your best, because someone is watching.*"¹

These days, against the backdrop of all the corporate scandals, the top jobs in Corporate America seem to be held in the least regard. Last year, in a speech I gave on trust in an age of uncertainty (yes, I admit, it was one of those now-cliché-ed 'leadership in turbulent times' themes), I said I

felt I had to give a disclaimer when handing out my business card with the title Chief Executive Officer on it – because there have been so many bad ones in the headlines.

All of us – across generations – have both the opportunity and obligation to change that stereotype, and to show that all work – whether for big companies, non-profits, or government – is honorable.

A number of you said that in thirty years, you wanted to work in the non-profit sector or government where you could give back to your communities. I hope some of you do because we need you in the public sector. But, I'd also advise you to consider that you can give back to others – and make a positive difference – in all sectors of the economy and in all stages of your career. You can climb the corporate ladder while staying true to your values. You can also start your career in the public sector and then move to business (at Booz Allen, we've had heads of government agencies, four-star generals, and astronauts all join the firm and become officers).

One of those who started his career in the public sector was Mike McConnell. He rose to the position of Vice Admiral in the Navy, and headed NSA, the US National Security Agency, before joining Booz Allen. Mike shared this advice about doing honorable work that he received early in his career.

It was: “Always seek to take on the most difficult and challenging jobs and never, ever worry about getting credit for your hard work or accomplishments.” Mike says, “That piece of advice has served me well. “The most difficult jobs are the ones that lead to greater personal growth and to positions of increased responsibility. “With respect to credit, I have found that one never needs to worry about getting credit. Those around you know the score and know what is going on. “Instead of seeking credit, I have found that not seeking it actually builds your reputation. If you do good work, the system will seek you out for the difficult tasks, your reputation and your stature grows, and your career progresses.”

One final piece of advice on choosing and doing honorable work – is from our senior partner Paul Anderson who just celebrated his 40th anniversary with the firm. Paul relayed this advice given him by a b-school professor: In any organization, you will find things that trouble you. Even the best companies are far from perfect. There are four responses you can have to this – three of them are acceptable and one is not. “One – you can decide to overlook the ‘bad things’ and focus on the positive. Two – you can try to change things for the better. Three – you can decide that the shortcomings really bother you and leave. All three of these options are valid. The fourth one is not – and that is to dwell on and complain about the things that trouble you, yet fail to move on or take positive action.”

So, remember – all work is honorable. It is our effort, our attitude, and our values that make it so – not the title on our business card or the number of people reporting to us.

The second major theme that emerged from the e-mails and interviews, is this: “Wisdom knows no rank.”

It's fascinating to listen to the most learned, most confident person in the room. And, in the world's top business schools, as in the profession of management consulting, we are blessed with the company of incredibly smart, hard-working people. There are times I sit in a meeting and

just get caught up in the intellectual stimulation and energy – listening and enjoying the interplay of ideas and solutions. It can be exhilarating. And, we are very lucky to have this kind of education and experience. But we can learn just as much – maybe more – from meeker voices – from those not in corner offices.

The best advice I got early in my career was from my office mate, Paul Boehm, at RCA. Paul was quite senior to me in experience and expertise and the more I talked with and learned from him, the more I saw that he was perhaps the smartest person in the whole company. But, instead of occupying a corner office with a large division reporting to him, Paul was sharing a cubicle with me. When I asked him why, Paul explained this was his choice. He gave his all to RCA while at the office, but he got to go home at a reasonable time and he didn't worry about work after he left. Paul spent a lot of time with his family and playing the piano which was his passion.

Paul told me that I had great choices about my future and I needed to choose wisely. He said I would be the one to control my destiny and decide what direction and how far to go. I've tried to take his advice to heart – and to focus on my own choices, and not be overly concerned with the actions of others or the fate of circumstances.

Paul remains to this day a key influence on my life – and one of the wisest people I've had the privilege to know. A colleague at Booz Allen considers two of the wisest people she knows to be an auto mechanic and a housekeeper, neither of whom completed grade school. So, look for advice and inspiration in unlikely places – not just from the most senior, most educated people you know.

Last month, I was speaking to Booz Allen's worldwide partners and built my remarks around a profound quote – that I had heard in a very unlikely place – a dumb movie. The movie was "Bruce Almighty." Back in June, my wife Janice and I went to see this movie in which a whiny TV reporter (Bruce, played by Jim Carey) rails at God for his lot in life. God, played by Morgan Freeman, decides to give Bruce all his powers to see if he could wield them better. Needless to say, almighty powers don't make Bruce any happier or more successful. And when he comes to ask why, God replies, "*It's not our abilities that define us, it's our choices.*" So, think about that – "*It's not our abilities that define us, it's our choices.*"

In this case, wisdom came literally from on high. But in our day-to-day lives, wisdom knows no rank.

The last "umbrella theme" from the advice I gathered, is about time – specifically: Time should be precious, but not anxious.

So, what do I mean by that? I mean that we need to cherish the days and hours of our lives and those of our loved ones – but we need not be so anxious and pressed about time that it becomes a worry rather than a gift.

I'd like to share with you some thoughts on this that I wrote in an e-mail to Booz Allen's worldwide staff on September 11, 2002. The subject line was "Moments in Time." And it read, in part:

Dear Colleagues,

Most days, our minutes and hours rush by in a blur of commitments, deadlines, and demands – all the things that are part of life in the 21st century. But a year ago today, time stood still. I’m sure each of us remembers exactly where we were when we first heard the news that a plane had hit the World Trade Center, and what we were thinking as we watched the terrible events unfold there, and at the Pentagon, and in the skies over Pennsylvania. The horror intensified as time went on, as we started to take in the enormity of the tragedy, worried about what might happen next, and learned that friends, family, and three of our own Booz Allen colleagues – Geep Fisher, Terry Lynch, and Ernie Willcher – had perished.

Let us spend a moment now to remember those who were lost – and those who were left behind – on September 11, 2001.

Knowing that time has been lost to them, we can honor their memory by making the most of our time:

- our moments of achievement at work and play,
- our moments of connection with people and places,
- our moments of passage and solitude.

We alone have the power to seize the moment, to spend our time wisely, and make a difference.

In the past year, I believe we have come to more deeply appreciate how precious our time and relationships are, and to find, in the aftermath of tragedy, many acts of selfless courage, an outpouring of human kindness, and recognition of the basic goodness in each other.”

Time is indeed a precious and fleeting thing. So, it’s important that we make the most of our time. In the words of Warren Bennis, we need to find the “magic in experience.” To me, that means not wishing hours to pass – even hours of work or sorrow. And, it means not rushing things – like decisions, people, or reactions.

I’ve always liked this quote, attributed to St. Francis: While hoeing his garden, St. Francis was asked what he would do if he were suddenly informed that he would die at sunset. He said – “I should finish hoeing my garden.” Admittedly, this is a saintly ideal, but I’m convinced we would all do well to strive for patience and satisfaction – and to be less anxious, less frantic, about time.

One of the things I’ve learned over the course of my career is to take more time to reflect, and not to take a hasty action or make too-fast a rebuttal. I’ve learned that you don’t have to win every battle in the first minute.

Booz Allen senior vice president Heather Burns offers this advice about taking time – to cool off. She said, “One of the things I’ve learned over time is to never quit something, or someone, out of anger. “Take time to work through whatever the circumstances might be, and if you need to ‘quit,’ make it about choosing something else as opposed to storming off in a fit of ego.”

One final light-hearted reflection on taking time – is from an editorial I heard last month on NPR. Commentator Morton Dean started his story; “This was a special summer for me. I will never be the same. *I hit a home run.* I had never hit a home run before, and I’m 68 years old.”

He concluded his story asking, “So what has changed about me since that super Sunday? Well, I walk differently. ‘*Man, I hit a home run,*’ my walk seems to say... “I think differently. I will finish that novel. I will paint that painting. I will hit another home run.

“And, I reinvested in the notion that it makes sense for older people to hang out with younger people, on the ball field and off. I believe even more fervently now that you should aspire to things that appear to be beyond your reach. I aspire to be younger.”²

So, on that note of aspiration across generations, I’d like to leave you with this thought as the key to “*No excuses, No regrets.*” I believe the key is this – “NO WASTE.”

We need to make the most of our effort – because all work is honorable. We need to make the most of all our relationships – because wisdom knows no rank. And we need to make the most of our time – so our hours are precious, not anxious.

I wish you great success in your chosen careers. And, I wish for all of you, that in thirty years, you will look back having ‘*No excuses, No regrets*’ – and you will look forward to great things still to come.

Thank you.

¹ Colin L. Powell, *My American Journey*, c 1995 Random House Ballantine Publishing Group.

² Morton Dean, *Commentary: Hitting a Home Run at the Age Of 68*, National Public Radio, Morning Edition, September 11, 2003.

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