

Everything I Ever Needed to Know About Leadership, I Learned in Kindergarten
by Leigh Anne Touzeau (excerpted from AACRAO's College and University quarterly journal)

One of the most simple yet powerful reminders of what a leader should do is found in Robert Fulgham's popular poem, "All I really need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten."

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school.

These are the things I learned. 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.

"These are the things I learned: Share everything." - My experience as a leader has taught me that "share everything" has several meanings. What it signifies most is communicating effectively and establishing trust. A significant aspect of communication is not only what information we share but how we share it. Leaders today have more technology at their fingertips than ever before: e-mail, faxes, beepers, and pagers are admittedly efficient ways of contacting people and communicating with them. But the most effective communicators remain those who make the effort and take the time to speak to people face to face with genuineness and sincerity. Too often, we seem too busy to connect with people in a meaningful way. Another important aspect of communicating is listening. The simple act of hearing what other people have to say and appreciating their unique points of view demonstrates a leader's respect for others and their ideas. How does a leader establish trust? The answer is honesty. Leaders need to keep those in their trust informed. They need to provide their people with the knowledge and data they need to perform their jobs to the best of their ability. On the other hand, nothing will destroy a relationship faster than lying or betrayal.

"Play fair. Don't hit people." - This reminds us that leaders must play by the rules and not act as if the rules do not apply to them. Too many commit unethical acts and treat others with little or no respect. Effective leaders are consistent in word and deed. We need to know who we are and what we believe.

"Putting things back, cleaning up after your own mess, and saying you are sorry when you hurt somebody." - refers to taking responsibility for your actions and being accountable for your decisions. It also means acknowledging your mistakes. A truly effective leader admits his mistakes, learns from them, and then teaches others the lessons he has learned. This relates closely to building and sustaining trust, to being honest and ethical. Followers identify with leaders who strive constantly to better themselves; not only do they identify with such leaders, but they also are more likely to work in support of them.

"Don't take things that aren't yours." - Often, in our work with others, ideas are stolen and claimed as another's own. It reminds me to focus on larger goals rather than on smaller distractions, such as someone else stealing one's own idea. If I keep my eye on the ultimate goal of serving students at my institution, it should not matter who gets credit for the ideas.

"Washing your hands before you eat" - having a plan, following the plan, and setting expectations for those on your team so that the goals of the plan will be achieved. Everything will go more smoothly when the leader takes the correct steps, follows the plan, and makes sure that all those who are following him are connected to the plan. A leader must be able to communicate her vision, the goals for the organization, and specific plans for achieving those goals. In my own experience as a leader, one of the most important aspects of executing a plan has been setting the expectations. Expecting someone to do well, and communicating that expectation can go a long way toward ensuring his continued success.

"Flushing" - as a concept fits well with conflict. Another aspect of conflict I emphasize with my staff is that after we have settled it, corrected the mistake, and/or cleaned up the mess, we need to move on and not nurse any past grievances.

"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 every day some. Take a nap every afternoon." - Having celebrations is extremely important; taking time away from the daily press of business can increase the effectiveness of an organization. Celebrations should serve a dual purpose: to honor a principle or an achievement, and to create a spirit of community.