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Leadership Inspiration: Stand and Deliver

By John Schumacher

Editor's Note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be a better actuarial leader. Here is the winning entry from the "Admirable Leader/Personal Mentor" category.

Before every actuarial exam I sat for, I would watch the inspirational movie called *Stand and Deliver*. This movie was produced by Warner Brothers and based on the true story about a high school math teacher in California. Sounds like a thriller, right? Actually the story is true drama in the sense that the students he taught had no leader to motivate them until Jaime Escalante came into their lives.

In the 1970s Escalante was working odd jobs before he was hired to teach computers at Garfield High School in Los Angeles. On his first day at Garfield, he is told that the school can't purchase the computers due to budget constraints. He is, therefore, forced to teach lower-level math.

He finds his consumer mathematics classroom is primarily populated with gang members and troublemakers who believe they have no reason to learn any math. Escalante thinks otherwise. He lets the classroom know that it was their ancestors who invented the concept of "zero" and that they have the roots of mathematical knowledge in their blood. He therefore abandons the consumer mathematics curriculum and teaches them algebra. Through clever demonstrations he pushes the kids to learn.

After a few years of teaching, Escalante informs the principal and his department chair that he wants to teach his kids calculus. The department chair scoffs at this, saying "You cannot teach logarithms to illiterates." The principal is initially reluctant but asks Escalante what he needs to accomplish this goal. He replies "*ganas*" (desire).

Escalante then informs his kids that if they sign a contract with him to work hard and bring *ganas* to the classroom over the next two years that they could each earn AP Mathematics credit. Kids being kids, they have a few moments of not following all of Escalante's rules, but he is an expert in inspiring them to excel. Before the AP test he tells the kids that "they are the true dreamers and that dreams can accomplish wonderful things. ..."



Despite all odds against these poor barrio kids, 18 of them pass the AP Math exam. Doubt steps in and the AP board believes that the kids cheated. The kids are forced to retake the AP Math exam and their passing results are confirmed. They passed.

How does this story apply to actuarial science? Math and actuarial science are difficult subjects to conquer. Both have a stigma about them that students shy away from. However, with the right leader, such as Jaime Escalante, the subjects can be mastered. With the right amount of *ganas* anything is possible with a true leader, whether passing AP Calculus exams or actuarial exams or inspiring a group of actuaries to solve difficult problems. All you have to do is stand and deliver. ■



John Schumacher, FSA, MAAA, is an actuary.