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Leadership Inspiration: Creativity Through Constraints

By Alan Gard

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 "Other" category.

"Come," I said to Akila, my new team member. "Let me introduce you to the one who has taught me the most about leadership."

Akila followed. "What are the most important lessons you've learned?" she asked.

"There are many!" I responded. "The most important are ... ONE: Build a great team. Acting independently is important, but you are only as good as your support team."

"TWO: Make those around you better. Know when to challenge them. Definitely know when to support them, know when they just need to have a laugh."

We neared the door. "THREE: Innovate. Creativity flows from finding harmony in removing preconceptions and adding constraints."

Akila looked confused. "Constraints and creativity go together?" she asked.

"Think Apollo 13 after the tank blew. I bet those who helped get the astronauts home safely were never as creative as they were when they were limited to only the items in the capsule," I answered.

We reached the door. I opened it and invited Akila in. She looked around and saw only a 3-year-old playing with Duplo blocks and miniature Batman and Robin figures.

"Are we early?" Akila asked, puzzled. "Your mentor was going to be here, right?"

"You're looking at him," I responded knowingly. "Leadership comes in many shapes and sizes. My leadership inspiration hap-

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pens to weigh only 28 pounds. That's my son, Alijah, and he inspires me to be a better leader every day."

I let that sink in a minute and then resumed, "Alijah has Down syndrome. His great team includes our family, therapists and many others. Granted, he didn't build the team. My wife worked tirelessly to do that. But his success will be a product of his own hard work and that of his extended support team. I've never seen someone inspire such positive feeling in others ... from strangers he waves at in the grocery store to knowing when to hug Mom or Dad ... he makes those around him better. And innovation ... he's been dealt a handful of constraints. Some are real. Some are forced on him by society. His life will be about removing preconceived notions and being creative in overcoming constraints."

Alijah laughed as Batman knocked some blocks aside. Akila smiled too. "I see what you mean, especially about the 'making others better' part."

"One question," she said. "You've talked about what you've learned from Alijah. That all sounds hard, not inspiring. What actually inspires you to be a better leader?"

Nobody had ever asked me that before. I thought for a while and responded, "It will be a hard road for Alijah. Substitute 'motivation' for 'inspiration.' Alijah's success will be dependent on the proactivity and advocacy of my wife and me. Some leaders are motivated by a natural proclivity; some by ambition. There's a fourth lesson I've learned from my experience with Alijah, rather than from him directly, that I should share. Sometimes, you are inspired to be a better leader simply because you know you have to be." ■



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