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A Tribute to Those Who Do Nothing!

By Kelly Hennigan

“What I’ve learned is that when I don’t know what to do, do nothing. Sit still and listen for that small voice that will always lead you and guide you. If you’re quiet and listen, you will hear it.”

—Oprah Winfrey

This is the third article in a three-part series¹ focused on the “Do Nothing” leadership approach presented by Professor J. Keith Murnighan, who was a Harold H. Hines Jr. Distinguished Professor of Risk Management at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. Murnighan was the author of the book *Do Nothing!* and promoted a synonymous leadership approach.²

The book states that all great leaders have passion for their work, have remarkable skill sets, and display determination.

I had the pleasure of both meeting and participating in a session led by Murnighan last year, at an SOA Council of Chairs meeting in Chicago. Over the summer, I was shocked and saddened to learn of Murnighan’s passing. It is only appropriate that I had planned for this final installment of the three-part series to be a tribute to leaders and their characteristics.

Do Nothing!’s last chapter is focused on unexpected leaders—or essentially ordinary people who possessed characteristics that led them to behave in an extraordinary fashion resulting in their becoming leaders. They all listened to that voice inside their head, which guided them to their unforeseen futures. The book states that all great leaders have passion for their work, have remarkable skill sets, and display determination. Each of the individuals Murnighan highlights, along with the professor himself, fit these characteristics.

SOICHIRO HONDA

One of these great leaders is Soichiro Honda, the engineer and industrialist who established Honda Motor Company. As a child growing up in Japan in the early 1900s, Honda was presumably similar to many other children of that era—he spent his time helping his father with his business (bicycle repair—from which the later development of a motorized bike and motorcycle were spawned) and was not overly engaged in traditional schooling. But, even as a toddler, he recalled being awestruck by the first car ever seen in his village. He reflected, “I could not understand how it could move under its own power. And when it had driven past me, without even thinking why, I found myself chasing it down the road, as hard as I could run.”

Honda seriously injured an eye in an automobile race in 1936 and two plants he had founded were destroyed in the 1940s—one by a bomber attack and the other by earthquake. Despite these setbacks, Honda’s passion for vehicles and determination resulted in the development of a billion-dollar multinational firm.

As president of Honda Motor Company, Honda had a unique perspective to hiring: “If you hire only those people you understand, the company will never get better than you are. Always remember that you often find outstanding people among those you don’t particularly like.”

He was true to his word, and thus employed someone he did not understand—Takeo Fujisawa—to oversee the financial side of the company. While the two colleagues were close friends, they possessed very different but complementary skill sets that enabled them to work together effortlessly. This teamwork enabled Honda Motor Company to further expand. In 1959, Honda Motorcycles opened its first dealership in the United States. Not only was Fujisawa an asset to the financial side of the balance sheet, he gained the respect of customers by honestly addressing any issues to ensure the customers’ relationship of trust was preserved. Similarly, Fujisawa maintained this bond of trust with Honda, and upon their retirements, both remained on as “supreme advisers” to the company.

MICHAEL KRASNY

Michael Krasny is referred to throughout *Do Nothing!* Like Honda, Krasny grew up helping at his father’s business—acting as a Toyota car salesman at a car dealership. Unlike Honda, the automotive industry was not Krasny’s passion. At 28 years old, he found himself out of work and needing cash. So, he decided to sell his own computer, placed a \$3 ad in the *Chicago Tribune*, and very quickly sold the computer for a \$200 profit. Thus MPK Computers, the predecessor to CDW Corporation, was born, with Krasny as CEO and chairman.

Seeing the great demand for computers, Krasny steadily grew his computer resale business. He expanded with the goal of be-

ing the most successful reseller of IT products and stated, “We went from area to area of the company looking for our weakest links and turning them into strengths.” Also critical to building the business was his focus on collecting customer information to improve execution. According to *Forbes*, his first caller from 1982 was still a customer 18 years later.

Krasny also recognized that the continued growth and success of CDW required new leadership and an expansion of the management team. After almost 20 years as reigning head of CDW, he named a new CEO and chairman in 2001, and eventually retired from CDW and sold the company for \$7.3 billion. When asked about his success, Krasny remarked, “There is no secret sauce, but there is a recipe. The recipe consists of equal parts of a) great coworkers who care, b) loyal customers and c) execution.”

MAGGIE DOYNE

Breaking away from the business and corporate world, another leader Murnighan highlights is Maggie Doyne, an American philanthropist who has built a children’s home, women’s center and school in Nepal. In 2005, upon her high school graduation from her hometown in New Jersey, Doyne took a year off to travel through an organization called LeapNow. She spent her time in India, volunteering at a children’s home and while there, became friends with a refugee from Nepal and traveled back to Nepal with her.

During this visit, Doyne met a 6-year-old Nepali girl who was barely surviving off of the rupees she received by selling riverbed stones. Doyne was inspired to help this child and others get an education and have a better life. She used what money she had access to, and then phoned her parents to request that they send her the \$5,000 she had saved up from her babysitting jobs. This, plus funds from supporters worldwide, enabled Doyne to purchase land in Nepal and found the nonprofit organization BlinkNow.

BlinkNow—“in the blink of an eye, we can all make a difference”—provides financial support and management oversight to a children’s home, a school, women’s center, health clinic and campus in Surket, Nepal. The Kopila Valley Children’s Home opened in 2008 to care for children who did not have any family—as of 2016, 45 children live there along with Doyne.

“I met children in need of a home and decided to build one for them. I wanted it to be the kind of home and the kind of childhood that I thought every child in the world deserved. It was really as simple as that.” Doyne is also the legal guardian for all of the children. She converted what began as a belief in the future of the children into a way of life.

J. KEITH MURNIGHAN

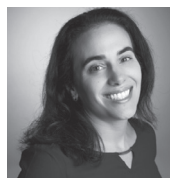
It is only appropriate that the final leader highlighted in this installment be Murnighan himself.

My initial reaction prior to meeting Murnighan last year was honestly one of disbelief—the notion of leading via doing *nothing at all* truly sounded ludicrous. Was the “Do Nothing” leadership philosophy purely a catchphrase to promote book sales? I very quickly learned that while the title appeals to light-hearted readers, the mantra of “Do Nothing” is directed toward serious-minded leaders!

In addition to his research and teaching, throughout his career Murnighan penned more than 130 academic articles and seven books. His writings on ambition and leadership have had a significant impact on business practices. Murnighan acted as a mentor, consultant and trainer to individuals as well as major corporations. He was recognized with many awards throughout his life—including a doctorate in economic science from the University of London and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Conflict Management.

In the brief minutes that Murnighan and I spoke together, I found him to be inspirational and impassioned about his life’s work. He had an indisputable genuine quality, which led to his success both in the classroom and as a professional. Achieving greatness as a leader requires this genuineness, along with diligence, perseverance, the ability to constantly seek out new insights, and to assimilate all of this information to continue to grow. Honda, Krasny and Doyne also exhibited these qualities, and possessed the passion, determination and remarkable skill sets that led them all to be the inspiring, yet unexpected, leaders they were or are today.

In conclusion, Murnighan observed that, “Great leaders do things differently.” And, in tribute to Murnighan, some great leaders “Do Nothing.” ■



Kelly Hennigan, FSA, CFA, is the chairperson of the Leadership & Development Section Council. She can be reached at kellymhennigan@aol.com.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Parts 1 and 2 in the series were published in the May 2016 and August 2016 issues of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at www.SOA.org/ld.
- 2 J. Keith Murnighan. (2012). *Do Nothing! How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader*.