



*THE GAME OF  
INFLUENCE*

**Brian Ahearn**

# The Game of Influence

Leadership and Life Lessons

Brian Ahearn

Copyright © 2022 Brian Ahearn. All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	5
BUMPING INTO AN OLD FRIEND.....	7
BUILDING A COHESIVE TEAM.....	10
Like the One You're With.....	10
Game Time for Pat .....	13
The Giver Mentality.....	15
It's Better to Give.....	19
REPLACING UNCERTAINTY WITH CONFIDENCE.....	23
All Peer Pressure Isn't Bad.....	23
Putting Peer Pressure to Work.....	26
A Trusted Expert.....	29
Becoming a Respected Leader.....	32
MOTIVATING PEOPLE TO TAKE ACTION.....	36
Ask, Don't Tell .....	36
Less Direct.....	41
Wins and Losses .....	44
Don't Be a Downer.....	47
YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT LIFE PLAYING THIS GAME.....	52
Self-Sacrifice .....	52
Pay It Forward .....	57
Brian Ahearn .....	62

## Introduction

PAT WALKED OUT OF Bill's office and stood silently in the hallway staring out a window. Bill was her boss, the vice president of HR, and she'd just received her six-month performance review, her first since taking over a small learning team at her company.

Now in her early thirties, Pat had been with the company just over five years when she was promoted into her current leadership role. She had a passion for learning and loved the daily grind. That was evident because she was usually the first person in the office and the last one to leave. She believed the training her department developed made a big difference, professionally and personally, for everyone in the company. Those traits made her the natural choice to lead the department when her former boss decided to take a similar position with a competitor.

Despite her passion for learning, Pat felt deflated and frustrated after the review. It was apparent to Bill that her

enthusiasm for learning had not translated to the team. In fact, there was grumbling about her leadership style. However, the bigger issue was the quality and quantity of work from the team was not what he expected when he promoted Pat. Never one to beat around the bush, Bill let her know about his disappointment in no uncertain terms. She knew a similar review at the one-year mark would not be acceptable.

How often has a scenario like this been the case for a new leader? Far too often! That's because being a top performer doesn't necessarily mean you understand people, a critical component to building and leading a successful team. That's the challenge Pat was facing. Perhaps you're facing something similar or know someone who is.

Let's look at her story because, if you've experienced anything like Pat did, her journey can help you.

# 1

## BUMPING INTO AN OLD FRIEND

PAT FELT TOO OVERWHELMED after that Friday afternoon meeting to go back and face her team. She needed time to process her thoughts. She pulled out her phone and sent a message to everyone to let them know she was taking the rest of the afternoon off. She decided to go to her favorite coffee shop to grab a caffeine fix and think about what had just happened.

The small shop was within walking distance of the office so she was there before anyone responded to her text. As she stood in line, she noticed someone a few people ahead of her. It was her old college basketball coach. She'd not seen Coach Smith since his retirement party seven years ago. Pat played four years of varsity basketball at a local, mid-sized college. A three-year starter, she was named captain of the team her senior year.

“Coach Smith,” she said in a slightly raised voice as she waved her arms.

He turned and suddenly a smile came over his face. “Pat? It’s been ages since I’ve seen you. How are you?” he asked as he grabbed his drink and made his way over to Pat.

Not one to hide her emotions, Pat tried to avert eye contact and replied, “Not so good today.”

Coach said, “I have a few minutes. Would you like to talk about it?”

Suddenly Pat remembered the many times over her four years where Coach would take her aside, lend a listening ear, and always offer sage advice. No matter the issue, talking with him always helped her gain a new perspective and feel better. With that thought in the forefront of her mind she answered, “I’d really appreciate that, Coach.”

They found a small table in a corner so they could have a little privacy. Almost as soon as their bottoms hit the chairs she began to share what had transpired in her career, the promotion, and the devastating review earlier that afternoon. She confessed she was at a loss as to what to do. Then she said, “Coach, I recall our senior year started off badly. If I remember right, we lost our first four or five games, and everything seemed to be in disarray.”

Coach Smith laughed and said, “Yes, we were a motley crew. With only two seniors on the team and you being the only returning starter, I knew it would be an uphill battle. However, I didn’t expect it to be as tough as it was.”

Pat went on, “And yet somehow you were able to pull us together, and we began to turn things around. If you had asked



me early in the season, or even around the halfway mark, whether or not we had any chance of competing for the conference championship, my honest answer would have been no. But you had us playing the best basketball of our lives by the end of the season and we won the conference tournament again. How did you do that?"

Coach Smith began, "As I just noted, I knew it was going to be a tough year given the loss of four starters and so many young players. Someone suggested that I pick up a book prior to the start of the season. It was about how to influence people, ways to change their thinking and behavior. As I read it, I was fascinated because it was based on research from social science. You and the other players didn't realize it, but I was methodically putting into practice what I learned from that book."

Then he glanced at his watch and realized he needed to go. He said, "Pat, as much as I'd like to stay, I really need to get going." Beginning to write on a piece of paper he continued, "But I'll make you a deal. If you pick up a copy of the book, I'd be happy to meet you here next week around the same time to start talking about some of the concepts. How does that sound?"

As he handed the piece of paper to Pat she eagerly replied, "I'd really appreciate that, Coach. I'll get the book this afternoon and meet you here next week at 3:30. Does that work for you?"

"It does," he said with a smile as they rose from the table and made their way to the door.

## 2

### **BUILDING A COHESIVE TEAM**

#### **Like the One You're With**

TRUE TO HIS WORD, Coach was sitting at the same table the following week when Pat walked into the coffee shop. With the book in hand, she enthusiastically waved to him as she walked to the counter to place her order.

She sat down and, after a few pleasantries, true to form, Coach said, “We have a lot of ground to cover. What do you say we get started?”

Remembering her playing days, Pat replied, “Sure thing, Coach!”

He began, “In order to create a successful team, you need to care about the people you lead, and they need to care about each other. The foundation has to be strong relationships. Your senior year it was apparent to me from the start that there wasn't a deep connection between the players, but it was my job to

help foster that. There were two principles in the book that helped me build a strong relationship with everyone.”

Pat chimed in, “I started looking over the book and I’m a little familiar with the different principles but I’m not sure which ones you used.”

He replied, “The principles of liking and reciprocity. The principle of liking tells us it's easier for people to say yes to those they know and like. That means it's critically important that your players like you but more importantly, that they know you like and care for them.”

Pointing to his head, he went on, “Everybody understands this, but few people know how to thoughtfully apply it so I’ll tell you three things I did. First, I made sure to learn as much about each player as I could so I could connect with all of you on things we had in common. That was important because it's natural for us to like people we see as similar to ourselves. Next, I made sure to let each of you know things about one another that might get you talking outside of the gym. I did this so you could foster better relationships between yourselves.”

Pat remarked, “So that’s why you told me about Jane’s Boxer pup?”

“Exactly. Because you grew up with a Boxer, I knew you two would bond over your pets,” he said with a grin.

Taking a sip of his coffee he went on, “The second thing around liking that I put into play was to pay genuine compliments and encourage all of you to do the same.”

“You did have a knack for looking for the best in people,” Pat recalled with a smile.

“I always felt like I was that kind of person, but I became more intentional about it after I realized paying compliments was another way of getting people to like each other. It didn’t just get you to like me, it was working on me, too. That’s because the more I looked for the good in all of you, the more I liked and cared for you as individuals, not just players.”

After sipping his coffee, he went on, “The third thing I did around liking was to put people in situations where they had to cooperate in order to succeed. You may recall that quite often I put players who clearly didn’t seem to like each other together in certain drills. I made it a point not to put them in drills where they had to compete against each other because that would have only heightened their competitive nature against each other. Instead, I put them in situations where they had to consciously work together as teammates. When you work together successfully, you’re more apt to acknowledge the contributions of the other person and liking naturally occurs. Is this making sense?”

Pat was busy taking notes but paused and said, “It makes total sense. It brings back memories about how you were implementing it throughout the season. And you’re right, the further we got into the season the more we sensed you truly cared for us. And, now I can recall times where some of the players who didn’t get along early on started coming together. We had no idea it was orchestrated by you.”

Coach took the final sip of his coffee and told Pat, “Basketball is about more than Xs and Os, and so is leading

your team. Let's pause here because I've given you a lot to think about and put into practice over the next week. Remember: Connect on what you have in common, pay compliments when warranted, and look for ways to get people to work together cooperatively. When we get together next week I'll let you know how the other principle, reciprocity, also helped foster a more cohesive team."

Unable to conceal her enthusiasm Pat said, "Thank you so much, Coach! I feel like I did when I played for you. I'm excited for the next practice." With that, they stood up, dropped off their empty cups, then made their way to the door.

### **Game Time for Pat**

Pat was thankful her mentoring with Coach Smith was Friday afternoon because it gave her time to digest his lesson over the weekend and think about how she wanted to put what she was learning into practice. Although she knew the people on her team, she had to admit that she didn't know them well. She'd been so focused on productivity that building relationships was an afterthought.

She decided it would be good to do a little research before Monday so she dug into social media accounts to see what she could find out about everyone on her team. It was eye-opening for her to see snippets of their lives outside the office. She learned several things about each person that she could either directly relate to or could show genuine interest in.

Monday rolled around and Pat made sure she was in the office earlier than usual. As people strolled in she made it a

point to set aside her work, something that was unfamiliar to her, in order to engage with each person and ask about their weekend. Truthfully, it was a little awkward for everybody because this was out of character for Pat. To her credit, she made it a point each day to tear herself away from her desk to talk with people when they came into the office. By the end of the week she found herself looking forward to those short conversations each morning.

Over the weekend Pat had also given thought to the tension she had noticed between Kim and Stan. There was a new learning project coming up for the marketing department so she decided this would be an opportunity to put Kim and Stan together to work on it. She made it clear to each of them individually, then together, that success would depend on them working closely with one another. That's because each possessed certain talents the other didn't but were necessary for the overall success of the project. It would take time to see the results of this little experiment but she was confident, given how it worked for her basketball team all those years ago, that it would make a difference for Stan and Kim.

She also made it a point to give praise when people did something noteworthy. This too felt unusual because, as a former athlete, her attitude was, 'Just do it!' But, she reflected on how praise from Coach Smith impacted her and the other players on the team so she knew it was the right thing to do.

When giving genuine praise she noticed how it affected her just as much as the person who received the compliment. First, the more she offered praise, the easier it was to find more praiseworthy things about each individual. She also noticed

when she gave praise she found herself liking and appreciating her team even more. This was an unexpected surprise.

Rome wasn't built in a day and building strong relationships takes time but when Friday morning rolled around Pat was more excited about work than she had been in a long time. She looked forward to reporting back to Coach that afternoon and was eager for the next lesson!

## **The Giver Mentality**

Pat was so excited to share with Coach Smith how her week had gone that she arrived at the coffee shop early. When he walked in she waved excitedly. He smiled and nodded as he waited in line for his drink. As he made his way to the table he could see that she was beaming and said, "It looks like someone's having a great day."

Pat replied, "No, it was a great week! I'm so excited to share with you everything that happened."

As she detailed what she'd done and the responses that she'd noticed, Coach just sat there with a wide grin. Then he said, "I'm so happy for you. Building a strong relationship with your team through the principle of liking is the foundation for everything else. It's the most important thing you can do and it's the easiest. I say easy because we're social creatures so we're naturally wired for relationships. Being thoughtful and strategic as you were this past week makes building those relationships easier."

Looking her in the eyes, Coach went on, "The reason liking is the foundation is because it sets the tone for all the other

principles. I think you'll see that as we start talking about the second principle, reciprocity.”

Pat furrowed her brow and had a look in her eyes as if she wasn't sure what was coming next. He said, “Reciprocity might be a somewhat unfamiliar term but I'm sure you've heard the term reciprocate.”

Pat said, “Yes, I'm familiar with that word. That's where I give to someone who has given to me first. It's give and take.”

“Yes and no. Yes, reciprocity is that feeling of obligation to give back to those who first give to us. However, we don't use a give-to-get mentality. In other words, we don't do something, or help someone, just to get them to do something in return. If people think you're only helping to get a favor then they might reject your offer. This is why the principle of liking sets the foundation. If you really lay hold of liking and genuinely care for the people that you're with, it changes your giving. For example, don't you genuinely want to help your friends, simply because they're your friends and you want the best for them?”

Pat reflexively answered, “Yes!”

Coach went on, “If you've really grasped the principle of liking, and use it on yourself to like other people, you'll naturally want the best for them. That's what changes your giving. Suddenly you're not giving to get. Instead, you're giving because you truly want the best for the people that you know and like. When they sense your sincerity, that's where everything begins to change because when you need help the people you've helped will want to help you in return. Does that make sense?”



“I never looked at it that way,” Pat replied. Thinking for a moment, she went on, “It makes complete sense. In fact, it makes so much sense that I can't believe we don't all do things that way.”

Coach told her, “It doesn't happen because too often we're focused on the wrong things. We try to get people to like us and the only time we offer help is to get something in return. People see through those approaches and that's what keeps them from forming the kind of relationships you need in order to lead a successful team.”

Then Coach shared an example from Pat's playing days. “Pat, do you remember when I asked you to work with Katie on her foul shooting and Sarah on her three-point shot?”

“Sure, Coach. Both were struggling early in the season.”

He went on, “I asked you to help both of them because they had specific needs and you were an excellent free-throw and three-point shooter. Did you notice after helping, how willing they were to do whatever you asked and to support you in your role as a leader?”

“Now that I think back on it, yes, they were some of my biggest supporters. They helped bring some of the other girls on the team along.”

Coach said emphatically, “Bingo! It was a strategic use of reciprocity on my part to help form that tight-knit team that we became by the end of the season.”

He continued, “Let me share a couple of things that will help magnify your giving. First, make sure whatever you give is specific to the person’s wants, needs, or likes. In other words, don't give a Starbucks gift card to someone who doesn't drink coffee.”

Pat responded, “Of course, that would be silly.”

Coach went on, “Yes, but quite often people assume others like the same things they like. Spend time getting to know people and you'll understand what they prefer so you can customize your giving to each person. The second thing to consider is more is better. If someone likes Starbucks, a \$5 gift card is nice but a \$10 gift card is even better.”

He paused for a moment because he could see Pat was furiously taking notes. Then he went on, “And the final thing to consider is to make your giving unexpected. We all anticipate gifts on holidays like Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays, or anniversaries. However when you give something out of the blue, simply because you were thinking of the other person, there's a wow factor to that.”

Seeing that the wheels were turning in Pat's head, Coach asked what she was thinking. She replied, “I'm amazed at how much I learned in just one week by really focusing on my team. I'm thinking about how I might use what you just shared to inform my giving.”

Coach glanced at his watch, noticed time was getting short, and began to wrap up the session. “Pat, I grew up going to church and there are two things I learned that tie into what we're talking about today. The first is the Golden Rule: Do unto

others as you would have them do unto you. That's a great starting point. Treat people, or give to people, in the way that you would want to be treated or given to. But, the more you get to know people the more impactful you're giving will be because you're not treating them, or giving as you would want to receive, but as they would like to receive. The second thing that I know to be true is this: It's better to give than receive. I know when you start to implement this principle with your team you'll find that to be the case. There is joy in genuinely helping people that you care about.”

It was nearly five o'clock when they stood up. Pat told him, “I'll never be able to thank you enough for these lessons, Coach. I'm so glad we ran into each other a few weeks ago and I'm thankful you're taking time to meet with me.”

That brought a smile to Coach Smith's face and he replied, “As a coach it's always been my goal to impact my players. These sessions give me tremendous joy because, even though I'm not coaching a basketball team, I see I'm still having an impact on people. Thank you for allowing me to do that, Pat.”

They confirmed next week's meeting, exchanged a quick hug, wished each other well for the weekend, then went their separate ways.

## **It's Better to Give**

Pat was just as fired up to put her second team building lesson into practice as she was with the first one Coach had shared with her. Once again, she made sure to get to the office early so

she could take care of a few things and feel ready to engage folks as they arrived.

To a person, everyone was still taken back a little by the difference they saw in Pat. They enjoyed the prior week and noticed Pat showed up the same way this week.

To start putting some reciprocity into practice, prior to everyone making their way into the office, Pat set up a 30-minute meeting with each person early in the week. A few took place on Monday afternoon and the rest were slated for Tuesday. Still conscious of what she first learned from Coach, Pat made it a point to engage liking to start each meeting, then looked for an opportunity to put reciprocity into practice.

She did this by asking what each person needed from her in order to do their jobs better. It seemed like such a simple question that she was surprised it had not occurred to her to ask it before. As she thought about that she realized she'd never had a boss ask her that question so it wasn't modeled behavior.

She was happy when people shared specific things she could do to help. Recognizing her skill-set, some asked for her advice on particular projects. Others talked about challenges they were having with individuals in different departments and wanted to know how she might handle those situations.

One team member who was under a particularly heavy workload and was having some challenges at home made a very different ask of Pat. She started the conversation, "Joe, I know you've been under a lot of pressure lately with your workload and the arrival of your second child. How can I help alleviate some of that pressure?"

Joe, somewhat hesitant, began, “I’m surprised you noticed. I didn’t think it was that apparent. Work seems busier than ever but it’s been compounded with the baby. Laura and I share duties so I’ve been up in the middle of the night quite a bit.”

“I don’t have kids but I’m sure that it’s not easy losing sleep then having to come here and focus,” Pat said empathetically. She went on, “I don’t know what I can do to help but I’m guessing you might have some ideas.”

Straightening up and looking Pat in the eye, Joe said, “What I could use is a day off to help get some things done around the house that we’ve fallen behind on. The other thing would be flexibility to come in later in the morning if I’ve had a rough night.” Before Pat could say anything he quickly added, “I’d work through lunch or stay late to make up the time.”

Much to his delight Pat immediately replied, “Both would be fine, Joe. Just let me know what day you’ll take off and shoot me a text on the days you know you’ll be a little late.”

Joe could barely contain his delight. This wasn’t what he expected to happen during this one-on-one. He thanked her several times before leaving her office.

Pat was pleasantly surprised at how good she felt by helping Joe and the others. She remembered Coach telling her, “It’s better to give than receive,” and thought to herself, “As usual, Coach was right!”

Each person in the department seemed much more upbeat and engaged as the week went on. Pat also encouraged everyone to reach out to one another to see how they might be able to

help each other. She shared the story about helping players on her college basketball team with their free-throw and 3-point shooting to illustrate how it helped form a more cohesive team during her senior season. She hoped that would be the case for their small learning team—that they would start helping each other more as opposed to being five individuals who primarily focused on their own work each day.

Two successful weeks with noticeable differences made Pat eager to meet with Coach on Friday afternoon for another lesson.

### 3

## REPLACING UNCERTAINTY WITH CONFIDENCE

### **All Peer Pressure Isn't Bad**

DESPITE HER ENTHUSIASM, PAT was a little late getting to the coffee shop on Friday. It had been a good week, but a very busy one for her and her team. She saw Coach Smith sitting at a table reading as she approached the counter to get her drink. As she made her way over to his table she noticed he was wearing a walking boot on his right leg.

“Coach, what happened to your foot?” she asked with a concerned tone in her voice.

He replied, “I broke my ankle several years ago and sometimes it flares up. When it does, it's easier for me to use the old walking boot rather than hobbling around. It's nothing to worry about,” he said with his familiar smile. Then he asked Pat, “So, how was your week?”

Pat began to recount more personal victories which brought an even wider smile to Coach's face. After she finished sharing she eagerly asked, "What's next on our agenda?"

"Do you remember when you were a child and your mother warned you about peer pressure?" he inquired.

"Yes, my mom was always warning me not to go jump off a bridge just because my friends might be doing it," she recounted with a chuckle.

"What parents like your mom were describing with peer pressure is actually called social proof. This psychological concept describes how natural it is for us to look to others to see how we should behave in different situations. We're more impacted by what other people are doing, how they're feeling, and what they're thinking, than we realize. We've been wired this way from the beginning of time to up our odds of survival because there's safety in numbers."

With an inquisitive look Pat replied, "I always looked at peer pressure as negative."

He nodded. "Most of the time, the way the term is used, it is negative. However, it can be used for good. An example from my coaching days that you may recall was looking to other teams that we aspired to be like. I would always call out those teams and tell you ladies what they were doing because I wanted to inspire you to do the same. Do you remember that?"

"I certainly do but I didn't understand the psychology behind it. Of course we wanted to be like those teams that were



in divisions above us that were so consistently good,” Pat replied as she sipped her latte.

Coach Smith continued, “The key is to point people to the behaviors that you want them to emulate. Too often people misuse the psychology.”

“How do they misuse it?”

“Most of the time, they point to what lots of people are doing when the behaviors are the wrong thing to do. That only sets in the mind of the listeners that maybe those behaviors are something they should be doing, too. For example, if a teacher laments how many students are cheating he probably sets in the minds of other students, ones who wouldn't otherwise consider cheating, that maybe they can also get away with cheating. The teacher's attempt to use the psychology backfires and gets the opposite behavior that the teacher wants.”

Pat asked, “So I should always look to others whose behaviors we want to model for motivation?”

“Absolutely!” Coach replied enthusiastically, sensing she was grasping what he was sharing. “And here's something else to consider: When lots of people are doing something, that's certainly motivating. However, it's much more motivating when you can point to others who are most similar to the people that you're trying to influence.”

“So, if I understand you correctly,” Pat began, “I should look to other companies that have learning departments about our size and, whenever possible, within our industry?”

“Absolutely!” Coach said again. “It won't do much good to compare yourself to a mega corporation because your team might feel that your company doesn't have the same technology, people power, resources, and other things to emulate those companies. But, if you look at companies who are a little further ahead on the curve than yours and consider what they're doing, I'm sure your team will think, ‘If they can do it we can do it, too.’ Make sense?”

Parroting back at him with a smile, Pat replied, “Absolutely!”

Looking at her with a look of contentment at having taught her well, Coach Smith said, “It seems like you have a handle on this lesson. I need to cut our time a little short today because I'm going to stop by my doctor's office. Same time next week?”

Pat replied, “Short of a vacation to Hawaii, I wouldn't miss it for anything.”

Coach laughed and told her, “If I get an opportunity to go to Hawaii, as much as I enjoy our time together, I'll take that trip too.” With that they stood up, hugged, and went their separate ways.

## **Putting Peer Pressure to Work**

When Pat woke up Saturday morning she realized she had caught some kind of bug and was under the weather. She didn't start feeling normal until Sunday evening. As a consequence, when she went into the office on Monday she didn't have the same bounce in her step that she had in the prior weeks. Fortunately she learned through athletics how to set aside how

she was feeling in order to focus on the task at hand. Back in the day it was making it through a tough practice or getting up for a game. Now it was doing whatever she had to in order to engage and lead her team.

She made her way to her desk and thought about how she might leverage Coach's lesson on social proof. She pondered how she could use it with her team to instill confidence in whatever she might ask them to do.

It was customary for Pat to read various trade periodicals. On this particular day she noticed an alarming trend when it came to organizational learning. Many large companies were moving away from learning and development (L&D) departments within their organizations because they were outsourcing this function to various online learning platforms.

She knew that trend was not what she wanted to highlight with her team because it might instill fear. She recalled Coach emphasizing that you want to highlight the behavior you want people to emulate. Knowing this, she looked for ways to highlight trends from organizations that were most similar to her company.

She continued to look over the magazines for something she could lay hold of to encourage her team. Almost immediately she came across an article that highlighted learning trends with midsize companies, those with 250 to 750 people. Unlike some of the very large corporations, these midsize companies were on an opposite trajectory, emphasizing the need for in-house L&D. They saw the more personalized training as an investment in employees, one that offered a critical advantage in attracting and retaining top talent.

During a team meeting Tuesday afternoon she shared the following, “As you know, I spend a good bit of time looking at what other companies are doing in the learning space. Recently I saw a disturbing trend. Lots of multibillion dollar organizations around the country are downsizing their L&D departments.”

She paused for a moment to let that sink in. As she looked at her team she could see the concern in their eyes. It was as if they were wondering, “Why is she telling us this and where is this meeting going?”

She went on, “However, the good news for us is the trend with mid-sized companies, those with fewer than 750 people. Within those organizations, investment in L&D is actually on the rise because it’s viewed as an advantage when it comes to attracting and retaining the best talent. The article stated many people want to work for companies where there is less of a ‘big corporation’ feel and where they have more access to people at all levels of the company. That’s us!” With that statement she could see people relax and begin to smile.

“Rest assured, I’ll be sharing the article with everyone on the senior leadership team,” she emphasized. From there she went on to highlight what some of those mid-sized companies were doing. She pointed out how their small team was doing some of the same things, like creating learning paths specific to the company. That made everyone feel confident that they were on the right track. That confidence also extended to Pat as a leader for having made the right choices about where to focus their efforts.

Next she pointed out what some of the top companies were doing that she and the team weren’t currently doing. She

told everyone she thought they had the ability to accomplish many of those best practices, given time and possibly adding a few more people to the team.

She concluded the meeting asking for volunteers to dig in and research ways they might start implementing the other L&D best practices. To a person everyone wanted to take some assignment.

On Friday morning, as she reflected on the last three weeks she couldn't remember having such excitement for her job and enjoyment of her coworkers. She could hardly wait to see Coach at the coffee shop to share all that was happening.

## **A Trusted Expert**

Despite her excitement to meet with Coach, Pat was ten minutes late getting to the coffee shop. "Coach Smith, I'm so sorry for being late," she began. "A meeting with my boss ran long."

Coach replied, "It's okay, some things can't be helped. One thing you have more of when you retire is time. I've enjoyed the people watching. So, how did things go this week?"

Pat dove in and told him how she shared information about similar organizations with her team. She said, "I started off sharing a disconcerting trend about big corporations and learning. When I saw a concerned look on some faces I quickly pivoted and said, 'However, the trend with mid-sized companies like us is an increasing investment in L&D.'"

“Well done, Pat!” Coach said emphatically. You may not know this but you did something key when it comes to influencing people. You started with a negative then transitioned to a positive using the word ‘however.’ ‘But’ is another transitional word you can use as well. People typically forget what came before ‘but’ and remember what comes after. At least that’s how it works in my house when Sally says, ‘I love you but...’” he said with a grin.

“Well, I guess I got lucky,” Pat replied.

“Perhaps, but now you know the power with transitional words so be thoughtful about how you present information.” Sipping his coffee, he went on, “What I’d like to share with you today is a principle known as authority. It basically tells us that people are more likely to believe individuals they view as trustworthy experts.”

“My team knows me pretty well so is there any need for this?” she inquired.

“Absolutely! You certainly don’t want to brag in front of them but your boss can say things about you that will come across as perfectly natural. For example, you said you were working on earning an industry specific learning designation. Whenever you get that, ask your boss to make a company-wide announcement about your accomplishment. And here’s something key: You should write most of the announcement. That’s because nobody knows you as well as you do. It’s an opportunity to make sure the right information gets in front of your team and others.”

“I never thought of that but it makes total sense. It’s similar to a speaker at a conference being introduced to the audience,” Pat said, verbalizing her thoughts as they emerged.

“That’s exactly right,” Coach said. “No speaker would leave it to chance as to what someone might say, or not say, when making an introduction before a big presentation.”

“What else can I do to leverage the principle?”

“Two things, one of which you already did. I said this principle is about being a trusted expert. You gain trust when you admit a weakness, shortcoming, or acknowledge you don’t know something. But you don’t leave it there. Transition with ‘but’ or ‘however’ into something you do know or one of your strengths.”

Laughing, Pat replied, “I have plenty of shortcomings and there’s lots I don’t know so I think that one will be easy to implement.”

“The second thing you want to do is cite any sources you have. For example, you mentioned having read about trends in L&D. Next time make sure you share the magazine, report, author, or website, by name with your team. That simple act adds lots of weight to whatever you’re sharing,” he concluded.

Squinting her eyes as she thought about it, Pat asked, “Is that why you always referenced other programs and coaches by name when you were implementing a change with the team?”

“Absolutely.” Coach leaned in as if he were revealing a secret. “You and the other players may not have realized it at the

time but that simple action on my part made it easier for all of you to buy into the changes.”

Pat smiled and said, “I feel like I’m getting to know the wizard behind the curtain.”

Smiling back at her, he replied, “It might seem like magic but trust me, there’s no wizardry to it. It’s applied science, putting the research from social psychology into practice. Besides, there was only one wizard, John Wooden, the Wizard of Westwood,” referring to the legendary coach of the UCLA Bruins basketball team.

Looking at her watch Pat said, “Again, sorry for being late. I really need to get going because I have friends coming into town this evening. As usual, you’ve given me plenty to ponder over the weekend. Same time next week?”

“Unfortunately I can’t meet next Friday because Sally and I will be taking a long weekend out of town. You have a good bit to work with now so how about meeting again in two weeks?” he asked as they got up.

Walking towards the door Pat said, “Yes, with all that you’ve shared so far I have a lot to keep working with. I hope you and Sally enjoy your time away.” With that they walked out of the coffee shop and waved goodbye.

## **Becoming a Respected Leader**

Pat enjoyed the weekend with her out-of-town guests then took Sunday evening to reflect on what Coach Smith had shared with her regarding the principle of authority and the importance of



being viewed as a trusted expert. She knew this would not be an overnight endeavor for two reasons. First, gaining trust takes time. Second, trying to establish herself as an expert quickly, if not done correctly, could make her seem like a boastful braggart. This principle would take patience and thoughtful application.

As was her habit, Pat arrived at the office about 45 minutes ahead of everyone else on Monday morning. She especially enjoyed the first 30 minutes of the day because it was an opportunity to read and think without any interruptions. As she thought about Coach encouraging her to share whatever she was learning and to cite her sources, she silently committed to herself that she would look for every opportunity to do so.

Later in the week she started working on a short bio that could be used as an announcement from her boss the following week when she officially earned her new designation. It felt awkward to write about her own accomplishments but she set the feelings aside and reminded herself in nearly every case where she read a bio, it had either been written by, or highly edited by, the individual for whom it was about. This was the case with authors, professional speakers, guest lecturers, and many others.

As she thought about this further she began to see other opportunities to rework her bio so it could be used for other purposes. For example, she occasionally spoke to employee groups and different departments within the company so it could be used as an introduction there. It would also come in handy to introduce her to people outside of the company if she happened to be a guest speaker. She even decided to use it to redo her LinkedIn profile. All of this made her realize the time

she was investing in this project would pay dividends in multiple ways which gave more weight to what she was doing.

During her Tuesday morning team meeting she shared what she'd learned from Coach around the principle of authority. She did this because she saw an opportunity for everyone to leverage the psychology with other departments throughout the company. She suggested whenever they were making a recommendation around learning, that they share not only supporting information, but also the source of the information.

By the end of the week she'd finished the article for her boss. During her one-on-one meeting with him Friday afternoon she broached the idea of having him use it when she got her new designation in a week. She started, "Bill, I have an idea I want to run by you."

"Shoot," he replied.

"I've been learning a lot about how to influence people's thinking and behavior over the last month. A trusted mentor suggested I write a short article about myself to use as a company announcement about the Certified Learning Consultant designation I'll receive next week. It's a big deal and I think it could help promote the corporate university."

"You wrote the article?" he asked with a curious tone.

"I know it sounds weird but think about it: Nobody knows me like me. It's a chance to make sure the most important points get highlighted. I think that's better than leaving it up to the Communications Department. Even if you wrote it, that

would take time so I thought I'd relieve you of that," she said with a smile.

Nodding his head, Bill replied, "I like your thought process and that you wanted to save me time, especially with my vacation coming up. Show it to me once it's complete. If we're both in agreement then we'll run with it. How does that sound?"

Feeling like she'd just hit an important jump shot, she leaned over his desk to hand him a piece of paper and said, "I thought you might say that so here's what I wrote."

Before she left the office they made a few revisions and Bill promised to get it to corporate communications for publication as soon as she was officially a CLC.

That afternoon, as she drove home she felt a huge sense of accomplishment. The time with Coach Smith was transforming her and her department. In the four years she had played for him in college, he had transformed her as a player and she was feeling that same transformation happening now. She was noticing a difference in how people were responding to her as a leader and it was fulfilling.

## 4

# MOTIVATING PEOPLE TO TAKE ACTION

### **Ask, Don't Tell**

THE FOLLOWING WEEK PAT was thrilled to receive her Certified Learning Consultant designation in the mail. She took a selfie with it and sent it to Bill so he could give the okay for the Communications Department to send the company-wide announcement they had crafted. It went out Thursday afternoon and almost immediately Pat received dozens of congratulations and well-wishes through the company intranet.

When Friday rolled around, she was eager to see Coach Smith. She brought a printed copy of the announcement to show him. She walked into the coffee shop about five minutes early and, true to form, Coach was already there with a cup of coffee, sitting at their corner table, chatting with some people sitting next to him.

“Coach, it's so good to see you. You look rested and relaxed. How was your time away with Sally?” she asked with genuine interest.

Coach replied, “It was wonderful! The weather didn't always cooperate but that was okay. Sally and I have been married for almost 50 years and I enjoy spending time with her just as much as I did when I first met her. We've both grown a lot and our interests have changed over time so we always have plenty to talk about. I appreciate you asking. How were the last two weeks for you?”

Immediately Pat launched into all that was going on. She told him, “I took your advice to heart about writing a bio. I talked with Bill, my boss, about using it to make the announcement about my designation. It worked like a charm! I had people reaching out to me throughout the company intranet. Even people I haven't met were congratulating me. I think it gained the corporate university quite a bit of good PR. In addition to that, I reworked the bio so I always have something ready if I need to be formally introduced. Last but not least, I updated my LinkedIn profile using much of what I wrote.”

With a familiar wide smile Coach Smith told her, “I'm so proud of you, Pat. Just like in your playing days, you're so coachable because you take everything you learn and put it into practice right away. Keep doing that and whatever you choose to do, you'll be a big success.”

It always made Pat happy when she got such praise from Coach Smith.

“Are you ready for another lesson?” he asked.

“Absolutely! What are we going to talk about today?”

“Even if we have strong relationships and people trust us as leaders, sometimes they're still not doing what we need them to do. If I think back to my coaching days, I always felt like I had very good relationships with each player. I know they looked at me as knowledgeable about the game and none of the young ladies who played for me were unsure about what needed to be done. However, there were always some who still weren't applying themselves as much as I needed them to. Early in my career this was the area I struggled with most, how to motivate some players to do the things the team needed in order to reach our potential,” he confessed.

“We didn't seem to have that problem during my four years,” Pat said, not believing that could have ever been the case for Coach.

“That's because by the time you played I'd learned an awful lot about people and the influence book was icing on the cake. There are a couple of psychological principles that are especially effective when it comes to motivating people. The one I want to talk about today is called commitment and consistency.”

He went on, “Let me ask you a couple of questions. Has somebody ever told you what to do and, even if you heard them, you didn't follow through?”

It was a tough question. Looking a little downcast, she humbly replied, “Yes.”

“And how did you feel about that?” Coach asked, knowing what she’d say.

“Not good, but sometimes it couldn't be helped. And truth be told, sometimes I didn't really know what was expected of me,” she said, trying to put a positive spin on her answer.

“Here's my second question,” he said. “Has someone ever asked you to do something that you said yes to, but then failed to follow through on?”

She replied in a more upbeat tone, “Not very often because I always knew my reputation was on the line if I promised someone I’d do something. Whenever that was the case I worked extra hard to make sure I kept my word.”

“That's exactly what commitment and consistency is all about,” he said as he took a sip of his coffee. “You see, there's something in almost all of us that wants to live up to our commitments. In many respects humans are little pleasure seekers and pain avoiders. When we live up to our word, we feel better about ourselves and we look better in the eyes of those we committed to. It's a powerful psychological concept because it's operating internally and externally.”

“That makes sense but I don't fully understand the difference,” Pat said, squinting her eyes as she thought about it more.

“The difference is asking instead of telling. When someone tells you what to do you don't feel nearly as bad, or perhaps not bad at all, about not doing what you were told because you didn't commit to it. However, when someone asks and you give

your word, that's what triggers the principle. Commitment, verbal or in writing, is more likely to prompt you to take action.”

Thinking for a moment Pat said, “As I reflect back on your coaching it never occurred to me before but I hardly ever felt like you told us what to do. Occasionally you might have told the team what to do, but when it came to individual players you were always asking. In fact, I remember when Katie was having trouble with her free throws. You didn't tell her to work on her free throws every day for 15 minutes before practice. If I recall correctly, I overheard you say, ‘Katie will you promise me that you'll be here every day 15 minutes before practice begins so you can work on your free throws?’”

Coach replied, “Wow, you have a great memory! You're absolutely right. Katie was really struggling with her free throws and I knew I needed a commitment from her to make sure that she would be there early every day. I know you didn't look at the stats as much as I did but early in her career she was barely a 50% free-throw shooter. By the end of her playing days she was just over 80%. It wasn't anything miraculous I did, it was all her doing, her hard work. All I did was make sure she was at every practice early to work on her free throws.”

Glancing at his watch he let Pat know he had somewhere to be so he ended their time asking her, “Will you make it a point to be less directive this week and start asking more questions?”

Smiling Pat replied, “I see what you did there, Coach. Yes, I will make it a priority to ask rather than tell.”



With that they got up, shared a quick hug, then made their way to the door.

## **Less Direct**

Over the weekend Pat thought a lot about the conversation with Coach Smith. As she reflected on his advice and her leadership style, she realized she'd been very direct with her team. Although Coach pointed out how he asked questions during practice, it wasn't something Pat noticed about his approach with players until that last coaching session.

Because she'd played basketball most of her life, Pat had many other coaches besides Coach Smith. As she thought about each coach she played for she realized all of them were very direct. It was expected when you were told what to do, you would do it, no questions asked. If you didn't, then you didn't play. "My way or the highway," was the formula. Her early years under those coaches must have overshadowed some of Coach Smith's approach. She also realized old habits are hard to break.

Tuesday morning she had her weekly team gathering. Sitting around the elongated oval table in a conference room, she was about 20 minutes into the meeting when it suddenly hit her—she was telling everyone what to do rather than asking. After the meeting was over she sat alone in the conference room for a few minutes to think about what had transpired. Several instances came to mind and the one that stood out most happened with Ben. She'd turned to him and told him she needed the monthly learning metrics report broken down by department no later than Thursday afternoon. She took the same approach with nearly every person, telling each what she

wanted and by when. While it was a little discouraging to realize she'd failed so miserably, she quickly reoriented her thoughts to the positive. That was, she'd never even thought about this before and in real time she was seeing where she was making mistakes. That gave her an opportunity to start making course corrections sooner.

Rather than address the group she decided it would be best to talk with each person individually over the next couple of days. She approached Ben first because he was the longest tenured employee. She met with him in his office rather than inviting him to her office because there's always a power dynamic at play based on where people meet. She wanted Ben to be as comfortable as possible so his office was the right place to talk.

She opened by saying, "Ben, I have something I want to apologize for."

Ben, looking slightly confused, said, "What could you possibly have to apologize for?"

Pat paused, then said, "As you know, I've been learning an awful lot about leadership from an old friend and I see that I've been making a mistake."

Ben inquired, "What's that? I have to say, things have actually been really good the last few months. Not that they were bad before, but I think we've all noticed a positive difference in you, Pat."

Smiling, Pat went on, "That's because of the mentoring sessions I've been having with my old basketball coach, Coach

Smith. He's taught me a lot about what it means to build and lead a team. That brings me to what I want to apologize for. I've been very direct in my interactions with all of you. I know nobody likes to be told what to do but that's most of what I learned from coaches growing up.”

Ben hadn't known why Pat wanted to meet with him and was pleasantly surprised at how the conversation was unfolding. As he thought about it he knew she was right. He said, “I really appreciate you telling me this. As I mentioned earlier, the last few months working for you've been the best I've experienced. I think changing your approach to engage us more will make things even better.”

Looking him directly in the eye, she replied, “Thank you, Ben. That means a lot to me. I'll be having this talk with each person over the next few days. I felt it was necessary to have one-on-one conversations rather than talking to the team all at once. It makes for more personal interaction and allows me to address any individual concerns people may have.”

When she got up to leave Ben said, “Hey Pat, one more thing.”

“What's that?” she asked.

“Will you tell Coach Smith thank you from me and the rest of the team?” he said with a grin. That brought a smile to Pat's face and she assured him she would do that.

## **Wins and Losses**

The rest of the week flew by and before Pat knew it, it was Friday afternoon again. As she was getting ready to meet Coach Smith at the coffee shop she reflected on the week. She felt good about having caught her mistake during the team meeting and then pivoting to talk to each person individually. The mood in the office was the best she could recall since taking over the learning department and she was excited about the future.

She arrived at the coffee shop 15 minutes early, hoping to beat Coach this time but he was already there. He was sitting at their usual corner spot, smiling and chatting with people around him. Pat walked up to him and said, “I got here extra early hoping I'd be the one sitting and relaxing when you walked in for a change.”

Coach laughed then reminded her, “When you're retired you have lots of time on your hands. I enjoy our time together and coming here so I find myself arriving a little earlier each week.”

“Well, I enjoy it too, so it looks like we have a win-win situation,” Pat replied as she flashed a smile at him.

“Funny you mention wins because that's what I want to talk about today, wins and losses,” he said, taking advantage of the perfect opening.

With a faint chuckle she replied, “I experienced plenty of both during my playing days and in my corporate role.”

Coach asked, “Pat, you remember your freshman season when we made it to the conference championship against all odds?”

With excitement she said, “Of course I do! We were the #8 seed going into the tournament so nobody expected us to win a game, especially the opener against the top-seeded team. I remember how excited we were when we won that game.”

“Now think about losing the conference championship. Even though we never expected to be there, how did you feel about that loss?” Coach asked as he gazed into her eyes.

“Even though we never expected to be in the championship, and the odds were against us winning, that loss hurt a lot. I think about that game often and what we might have done differently,” she replied in a somber tone.

“Do you find yourself thinking about the sting of that loss more than the joy we experienced when we won that first game against the top-seeded team?”

“Yes!” Pat said emphatically.

Coach Smith began to share. “That's exactly what I expected you to say and it leads to what we're going to talk about today, scarcity. Social psychologists have statistically proven that people feel the pain of loss about twice as much as the joy of gaining the same thing. It's exactly why, despite how monumental that first victory was in the tournament, losing the conference championship overshadowed it for you and the other players. If you think about times in your life where you've

experienced great joy and great sorrow, doesn't the sorrow feel stronger and seem to linger a bit longer?"

Pat nodded. "I wish it didn't but that always seems to be the case."

Continuing to look her in the eye, Coach went on, "When you understand this you need to begin to look for opportunities to reframe what you might have talked about as a gain into loss, or positive into potential negative. Now let me be clear, I'm not talking about being a fearmonger or using scare tactics. I'm talking about honestly reframing what someone might gain to what they might lose by not going along with whatever you're proposing. If you take this approach, I think you'll find more people doing the things you need them to do because they don't want to experience the pain of potential loss that you've highlighted. Make sense?"

"It does make sense but I think this will be a challenge for me because I've always tried to be optimistic and upbeat."

Coach assured her, "It will feel awkward at first so it will take some practice and getting used to. Just remember, you don't want to come across as a downer."

After sipping his coffee he went on, "Here's an example that might help you. In the past, if you shared what a competitor was doing, you might have told the team you're implementing some changes because you want to be like that industry leader. That's how most people would frame the change. Reframing it to incorporate scarcity might sound like this, 'I was reading about XYZ Company and what they're doing around follow-up

coaching and learning. We're going to take a look at doing the same thing because we don't want to fall behind.”

“That doesn’t sound negative at all. I think I can do that,” Pat replied with a sense of relief in her voice.

Their conversation lasted another 20 minutes as Pat shared some changes that were coming up. She worked with Coach on how she might reframe some of her initial messages to incorporate a scarcity approach. The changes could potentially boost the team’s output which would make her feel much better when she had her next semi-annual review with her boss.

When they wrapped up, Coach told her to go on ahead of him because he wanted to stay a few more minutes. He said he had some thinking to do and he liked the atmosphere of the coffee shop.

## **Don’t Be a Downer**

Eager to put Coach Smith's lesson on scarcity into practice, Pat saw the perfect opportunity Monday afternoon. She'd attended a leadership meeting and the company sales results were significantly less than where they hoped to be at the six-month mark.

Company results were the basis for the annual bonus plan. Not only did the company have to generate a profit, they also had to reach certain sales metrics for everyone to qualify for the bonus. At the rate they were going, getting any bonus looked to be in jeopardy unless sales radically turned around in the second half of the year.

At her weekly team meeting Tuesday morning, Pat addressed the situation. She opened the meeting saying, “Yesterday I was at the leadership meeting and learned our sales results are not good. It looks like we won't be getting a bonus unless there's a big turnaround before year-end.” Immediately she saw everyone's face fall and looks of concern came over everyone.

Trying to be a little more positive she went on, “I'm not saying we won't get a bonus. It's just unlikely without a sales turnaround.”

Unknowingly she fell into the trap so many people stumble into when trying to use scarcity to motivate behavior. Despite Coach's warning, she came across as a fearmonger, a real downer. She wasn't sure what to do to rally her team and suddenly she felt like all the goodwill she'd built up over the last several months was out the window.

She tried to rally the group, reminding them the sales training they were working on could have a big impact on performance, but she didn't get much response. They slogged through several other issues on the meeting agenda then everyone left the room silently.

She stayed in the empty conference room and called Coach Smith. He answered the phone in his usual jovial tone, “What's up, Pat?”

“Coach, I think I messed up,” she said with concern in her voice.

“What happened?” he asked, matching her emotional state.



Pat shared some of the high-level details of the leadership meeting and how she tried to use a scarcity approach to motivate her team to work even harder in the second half of the year, but it fell flat. “What can I do to turn this around?” she inquired.

In a reassuring tone Coach said, “It's not the end of the world, Pat. This is no different than when we had a poor first half in a game and had to dig ourselves out of a deep hole. I didn't have to tell the team how far behind we were because everyone could see the scoreboard. I also did my best to never make being down at the half seem insurmountable. I think you may have gone overboard with your team because it sounds like they don't see a way to win in the second half of the year. Is that a fair assessment of the situation?”

“When you put it that way, I think you're 100% correct. Any ideas on what I might do to rally the team for the second half?” she asked.

They spent the rest of the time on the phone strategizing. By the time they hung up Pat felt much better mentally and emotionally.

Before the end of the day she gathered everyone together for a quick meeting. She didn't want people leaving the office feeling dejected.

Pat opened the impromptu meeting. “As all of you know, I've been mentored by my old basketball coach. He's taught me quite a bit about how to use social psychology to build a more cohesive team. He was excellent at that during my playing days and so much of what he's taught me I've put into practice over

the last several months. Based on your feedback, it seems like morale and production have picked up significantly during that time. From my vantage point it looks like we're working together as well as ever.”

Pausing to take a breath, she went on, “One of the concepts he taught me about recently is scarcity. It's a psychological principle that people are more motivated by what they may lose versus what they might gain. It was my intent during our meeting earlier today to motivate you to work extra hard, so we don't miss getting a year-end bonus. However, my approach backfired because I started off so negatively. The truth is there's still an opportunity for the company to turn sales around but we can't expect the salespeople to do it alone. We can help the cause by developing training that enables them to do their jobs to the best of their ability. This is an opportunity for us to show how big an impact we can have. I didn't want to let you go home looking as dejected as you were when you left the meeting earlier today. Between now and tomorrow I'd like each of you to think of a couple of ideas you can bring to the table tomorrow morning that we can kick around to help the sales team. By the end of the week, I'd like to go back to the leadership team to tell them I heard what they said, and we are ready to do our part. How does that sound?”

Suddenly the mood began to shift and, breathing a sigh of relief, some people began to share ideas on the spot. This impromptu meeting was what Pat had hoped for originally. There was a sense of working even harder because they wanted to help and didn't want to lose an opportunity for the year-end bonus without a fight; many people in the company depended

on the bonus to pay for the holidays and vacations over winter breaks.

When Pat left the office, she felt a sense of calm and relief, having learned a valuable lesson.

## 5

# YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT LIFE PLAYING THIS GAME

### **Self-Sacrifice**

FRIDAY AFTERNOON ROLLED AROUND and Pat eagerly looked forward to another lesson from Coach Smith. This time they met at the door, each walking into the coffee shop at the same time. Pat noticed Coach was walking a little slower and breathing a little harder than normal.

“Coach, are you okay? You look like you’re laboring a little bit,” she asked with a concerned tone.

“It comes with the territory,” he said with a chuckle. “Getting old isn’t for the faint of heart.”

As they approached the counter Pat turned to Coach and said, “This one’s on me.” In his gracious manner he responded with a sincere, “Thank you, Pat.”

They made their way to a table and began with a little small talk about the previous week. After Pat shared about her mistake and recovery with scarcity she asked, “So what’s on the agenda this week?”

Coach started, “Do you recall me telling you and the other players, ‘You’ll learn a lot about life playing this game?’”

“I think we all remember that phrase because we heard it so often,” Pat told him with a small laugh. She continued, “To be honest, in the middle of a hard practice or after a tough loss I don’t think we really understood it. In those moments it just seemed like something nice to say to encourage us.”

“And now what do you think about it?” Coach asked.

“Between our playing days and spending time with you these last few months, I believe I’m starting to get it,” she said encouragingly.

That brought a smile to his face. “I never really expected my players to ‘get it’ in the moment. It was one of those concepts I was trying to teach that would come back in time to pay dividends because it’s true. It’s no different from raising a child. As a parent you do many things knowing they’re in the best interest of your children, even though they don’t understand it in the moment. Two clear examples of that are making sure your kids get an education and stay healthy. Those two things pay dividends over a lifetime.”

Pat jumped in. “I can see that. I’m thankful for the education I received and the discipline I learned playing basketball. I certainly don’t work out like I did when I played for

you, but I still eat healthy and make it to the gym three or four days a week. I always feel better about having done both throughout the week.”

Coach began, “What I want to share with you today is a concept called unity. We talked about liking and how important it was to really like your teammates. Unity goes much deeper than that. Unity is about having a shared identity with someone. My clearest example comes from my father who served in the Marines at the end of World War II. Every time Dad met another Marine there was an instant bond. Dad would’ve done anything for another Marine, including giving his life. And other Marines would’ve done the same for him. That’s because of the bond that comes through unity. You can define unity this way, ‘it’s easier to say yes to those who are of us, of our band, tribe, or family.’ Do you understand what I’m talking about?”

Pat replied, “I think so. I know there are things I’ll do for my family, even distant relatives, that I wouldn’t do for my closest friends.”

“That’s exactly it,” Coach said in an affirming tone. “When you have unity, helping those you feel that deep connection with in a very real sense helps you. It may require a great sacrifice but the feeling that you get knowing you’re helping someone you’re bonded with, and the willingness to sacrifice for them, goes beyond anything else I’ve taught you. I equate it to love. When I talk of love, I’m not talking about the intense feelings that we have for certain people or things. I’m talking about the decision to do what’s best for another, even when it may cost you. That’s what I observed with my father, knowing he would’ve sacrificed his life for a fellow Marine during that terrible war.”

Pat asked, “I can see how to apply all of the other principles but I’m not sure how I can apply unity. I don’t have a deep connection with everyone I meet.”

“Don’t worry,” Coach said in a reassuring tone. “You won’t have unity with everyone you meet. There was only one person who did, but we can slowly tap into unity if we can find things we’re deeply bonded by. It’s much easier to do with a close knit group of people, a team. When you reflect on your playing days, don’t you think you’d do just about anything to help a former teammate?”

“I never thought about it but I think I would.”

Coach went on, “That’s because of the time you spent together and the intensity of the experiences you shared. You could look at one another and almost know what the other person was thinking and feeling in the moment. Pat, you have an opportunity to build that unity with your team. There may not be something like a physically hard practice to bond you but I’m certain you’ll find activities that can help your team. That, and the sheer amount of time that you’re spending together, can build unity. It starts with you as the leader.”

Thinking hard, Pat asked, “I’m not sure how I’ll put this into practice so quickly next week.”

With an encouraging tone Coach said, “I don’t expect you to come back with a report next week of having executed this principle. It will take time. But my advice to you is this: Put the needs of your team above yourself. That doesn’t mean always doing what they want, it means doing the kinds of things I did when I was coaching all of you. Your goal is to have a high-

performing team and the best way to make that happen is by becoming the kind of leader they feel deeply bonded to. That comes about when they know that you're putting their interests above your own."

Pat sat there in silence, looking up as she contemplated Coach Smith's wisdom. She nodded as she absorbed the lesson. They continued their conversation for the allotted hour as Coach shared more insights around unity.

When they got up to leave Coach Smith thanked her. Pat responded, "No, Coach, I need to thank you because you've shared so much wisdom with me. It's been so helpful and will benefit my team and beyond."

Coach looked at her with moist eyes, and said, "No Pat, it's you I have to thank. You've allowed me the opportunity to share the things that are deeply important to me. Knowing you from your playing days, and our time together here, I have no doubt you will pass along these concepts and will help many people as a result. My legacy will live on through you and others. The unity that I just described, love, that's what I'm feeling now. You think I helped you but you helped me. I am thankful we bumped into each other months ago and that it led to this opportunity to share with you."

Somehow Pat felt deep down that their time together was coming to an end but she brushed it off as being a little emotional in the moment because of the talk of love. They hugged and she said, "I'll see you next week, Coach." He didn't reply but stood there quietly watching her as she walked away. He felt a sense of peace and contentment.



## **Pay It Forward**

Pat had an uneventful week at the office. She couldn't put her finger on it but she felt melancholy most of the time. She wasn't sure if it was coming down from the high of so many weeks where she saw instant response to the things that Coach Smith was teaching her or if it was something else. Despite how she was feeling, her mood lifted Friday around lunch as she thought about seeing Coach that afternoon at the coffee shop.

As was becoming her custom, she arrived a little earlier than the arranged meeting time. She was surprised that Coach wasn't there when she walked in. He was always ahead of schedule because of the freedom he had in retirement and his enjoyment of talking to people.

Pat ordered her drink then sat down to relax while she waited for Coach to arrive. She kept glancing at her watch wondering what could be keeping him. Before she knew it 15 minutes had passed. She was just about to call him when she noticed Sally, Coach Smith's wife, walking in and looking around, as if she too was looking for Coach.

Pat had not seen Sally since her playing days. She had fond memories of her because she was always at the games supporting the team and Coach. Suddenly their eyes locked and Sally began to make her way over to the table. Pat had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if she knew something was dreadfully wrong.

Pat remembered that Sally always carried herself in a dignified way but today she looked out of sorts as she made her way across the cafe. She walked up to Pat, extended both of her

hands to hold Pat's and said, "Pat, it's so good to see you. Coach has told me all about your meetings and how much they meant to him." Even to Sally he was Coach.

The past tense phrase Sally used caught Pat's attention. Her voice cracked and she asked Sally, "Why did you say 'meant'? Is there something wrong with Coach?"

Suddenly Sally's face betrayed sadness and she told Pat that he'd passed away a few nights before in his sleep. She began to share a little about his medical history and several bouts with congestive heart failure in recent years. Now Coach's slower than normal movements and breathing struggles at their last meeting made sense to Pat. As Sally continued to talk, tears started streaming down Pat's face.

Seeing her reaction, Sally stopped mid-sentence and hugged her. She whispered in her ear, "It's okay, we're all going to miss him."

Trying to compose herself, Pat said, "I'm so sorry. I should be comforting you Sally. With all you're going through, why did you feel the need to come here to tell me this in person?"

Sally began, "You have no idea how much coming here to see you these last several months meant to him. He talked about you constantly and how much he enjoyed getting together with you. It reminded him of his coaching days because it was a chance to impact your life. We both sensed the end might be near and that's why we took a short vacation about a month and a half ago. We needed time together to make sure we said everything that needed to be said. Over the weekend he wrote something for you and asked that I give it to you whenever he

couldn't make it here again. I've not read it so I don't know what he wanted to share with you. Despite the emotional roller coaster, and all the things that are now in motion planning his funeral, I felt I had to give you this in person because you meant so much to him. You mean just as much to me because of the joy you gave him."

Tears started pouring down Pat's face again and she tried to compose herself.

Sally told her about the funeral details on the upcoming Wednesday. As she got ready to leave Sally said, "Don't open the letter here. Take it home with you so you have time to read it and grieve in a way that's comfortable for you. Again, thank you for the opportunity you gave him because he was so happy right up to the end."

Pat sat in silence for quite a while after Sally left. She never touched her drink and unknowingly left it on the table when she got up to leave. When she got home she took a long walk, still in shock and trying to compose herself. It was after six o'clock when she finally sat down to read the letter.

Dear Pat,

If you're reading this then I've gone home. No need to cry for me because I've lived a joyful life and feel I'm going out on top, a winner in the biggest game of them all—life. I owe much of that to you. Retirement has been good but I missed coaching because it allowed me to impact people.

Seeing you at the coffee shop months ago was not a coincidence. I saw it as a divine appointment. God put you in my life again so I could have one last chance to coach. Your enthusiasm for learning and personal growth invigorated me. I knew we'd make it through everything I needed to share before I was called home.

Now your charge is to take up the mantle and coach others. Business is a different game than basketball but the team building principles are the same. Use what I've taught you to build strong, productive teams the rest of your career. But more than that, be the kind of coach who impacts people's lives on and off the court. I've no doubt you will and that gives me great comfort.

Please remember to always pay it forward. Trust me: As you do so, you will get so much more than you give.

With love,

Coach Smith

Once again tears were streaming down her face. Pat folded the letter and walked over to her bookcase where there were pictures of family, friends, and significant events.

She picked up the picture of Coach Smith and the team when they won the conference championship her senior year.

She stared at it for several minutes and was flooded with memories of her playing days. She placed the letter on the bookcase then gently set the picture on top of it. There was no better place to keep such a wonderful gift.

Suddenly the tears stopped and a feeling of peace washed over Pat. She knew she would miss Coach but gratitude was what she was feeling at that moment. That's because of the time they'd spent together and all she'd learned. She knew a piece of him would remain with her forever.

Standing by the window in her kitchen, looking at the people going about their normal lives, she took a deep breath, looked up at the puffy white clouds and made a commitment: "You can count on me to pay it forward, Coach."

## Brian Ahearn

[Brian Ahearn](#) is the founder of [Influence PEOPLE, LLC](#). An international speaker, trainer, coach, and consultant, he helps clients apply the science of influence to ensure more professional success at the office and personal happiness at home.

Brian was personally trained by Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D., the most cited living social psychologist on the planet when it comes to the science of ethical influence and persuasion. Brian is one of only a dozen individuals in the world who currently holds the coveted Cialdini Method Certified Trainer (CMCT) designation and he is one of just a handful who have earned the Cialdini Pre-suasion Trainer (CPT) designation.

[\*Influence PEOPLE: Powerful Everyday Opportunities to Persuade that are Lasting and Ethical\*](#) was Brian's first book. Not only was it an Amazon bestseller, it was named one of the Top 100 Influence Books of All Time by BookAuthority.

Brian's second book, [\*Persuasive Selling for Relationship Driven Insurance Agents\*](#), was an Amazon new release bestseller.

[\*The Influencer: Secrets to Success and Happiness\*](#) was Brian's third book. It's a business parable to teach readers how to incorporate the psychology of persuasion into their daily lives.

A LinkedIn Learning author, Brian's courses on applying influence in sales and coaching have been viewed by more than half a million people across the globe.

When Brian isn't influencing people, he enjoys reading, traveling, working out, good Scotch, and spending time with his wife, Jane. Together Brian and Jane have one daughter, Abigail, who is an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter.

### **Looking for a speaker for your next event?**

Connect with Brian on [LinkedIn](#).

Visit Brian's [website](#).

Email him at [Brian.Ahearn@influencepeople.biz](mailto:Brian.Ahearn@influencepeople.biz)