

Teacher: “This is our new president, Mr. Lilly!”

Kindergartner: “I thought Trump was our President?”

Teacher: “No, this is the new president for our school system!”

Kindergartner: “Good. I like Trump better.”

The first introduction of new leadership to students of the Owensboro Catholic School System occurred under a shade tree at the K-3 campus while enjoying pizza and a drink purchased by their parents at the annual school auction. They weren't very impressed with the announcement!

It's been five years – almost to the day - that the fourth and last of the Lilly children graduated with a Catholic School Education. For over 25 years, I served alongside Catholic Education throughout the Diocese, and I even served Catholic Schools in Lexington and Evansville. So the day after the formal announcement, I used the last few days of the school year to visit sites, staff and work through numerous requests for input and discussion. I'm sure a lot more requests are coming. These last two weeks have been a tsunami of expressed celebration, concerns, issues, and a daily reminder of how passionate we are about our children and our faith!

WHY DID YOU ACCEPT THIS POSITION?

There have been questions why a 59-year old would make such a dramatic change this late in his career, but not from those who have served with me in the past or who know me well. I worked with some outstanding people in the banking industry for the last five years. We had a very successful team that enabled me to work with great people, and I met wonderful clients who support their families, employees and many who were generous with their resources. It was a great means of support for my family!

On the other hand, it was also the first time in my professional career that my place of employment did NOT have a chapel or serve a Catholic mission. In some ways it was a lot less stressful serving the Church as a volunteer rather than as a paid employee, but over the last few weeks more and more people - some of the people I respect most in this world - asked me to consider putting my skill sets back to work for the Church. Even **my wife** LaNell, who has spent the last 39 years of my life getting to know me the best, remarked that I was talking about the potential for the position with a lot more energy and passion than I ever talked about the things going on at work. I know we have financial, relational, and some perception issues about our school system. But then I also know that in this community, some of our brightest and best have benefitted from a Catholic Education and would serve in advisory capacities. I know we still have the commitment of parishes and parents. We have actively engaged boards. And most importantly, we have many dedicated and vocation-based teachers and staff who take the business of education very seriously. I'm not trying to sugar coat some Pollyanna-ish description of reality. We have issues. No person in the system reflects our values perfectly. Finances have always been an issue. But the data is very clear. Catholic Schools

are a powerful and effective system that permanently changes lives. Just read last week's Wall Street Journal! So I consider it a blessing and an honor to be asked to serve this incredible mission. This role is a gift to my family.

TO MAKE A LONG STORY LONG

In this first column, I would like to lay out a couple of simple beliefs and approaches to business that will try to maximize the potential we have for Catholic Schools. The longest version is to read two very relevant books on business. It was required reading for all of my managers; The first one is First, Break All The Rules. The second book is the first couple of chapters in Emotional Intelligence 2.0. The guidance in these books uses data, not theory, to maximize an employee's potential. No anecdotal stories allowed. Just show me the data! Though my graduate work is not in education, my post degree track was a corporate specific customized education, an education strategy utilized by many businesses today. So after two years on the campus of Washington University, and certificates of completion from the Madison Institute at the University of Wisconsin and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, we learned best method practices for moving organizations forward.

Here are some of the nuanced principals (and I'm sure I'll be held accountable):

- Be transparent with your information, but make sure you're consulting with value-based people who have a broad vision for the organization and are free of conflicts of interest or relational bias.
- Make a decision, when you can't reach total consensus, but don't necessarily be persuaded by the loudest OR the friendliest voices.
- Prioritize your time with laser like focus on THE most important issues first. Put quality time toward these efforts every day before moving on to second and third tier priorities. Do the things we NEED to do first, not the things we ENJOY doing.
- Reward problem solvers. Many people have the gift of spotting issues, errors and slights. Recruit the ones that bring solution steps to the table.
- Apologize for the mistakes we make, and forgive the ones that others make. Sometimes the mistake that someone else makes is an attempt to raise the bar and make our system better. Sometimes too many mistakes add up and require a course of action. But since I won't carry out the responsibilities of my position perfectly, don't expect others to carry theirs out perfectly either.
- Find people who still love their work, who are still open to creative solutions and who can be positive about their workplace 75% of the time. We don't do anybody a favor when we keep employees who are angry, negative and dissatisfied. Find ways to make their lives happier, by helping them find another satisfying vocation. This means we have to be more aggressive and thorough in our recruiting processes.
- Find people who will challenge authority from time to time or ask questions and have opinions different from my own. Though nobody likes to feel stupid or wrong,

don't let my own insecurities block the thought processes of somebody else who thinks differently from me.

- Accept that there are areas of this business where I don't have expertise. Use the expertise of others to fill in your gaps. None of us should have to be all things to all people. That's either ignorance or insecurity at work.
- Find some quiet time each and every day to honestly reflect/pray. Something mystical happens in a prayerful process where people unite their prayers for a common cause. Something also happens to us personally when we use time to try and purposefully change our attitudes and our behaviors. It doesn't mean we won't make mistakes or get along with all people, but without honest reflection, we simply stop maturing. We stop growing as humans.

Case study after case study identified how super successful corporations, not for profits and other institutional organizations failed simply because nobody challenged leadership, or leadership failed to listen and consult honestly. Challenging the system from a solution perspective is not the same as someone who often complains. Discerning the difference is essential.

THERE IS AN END TO THIS COLUMN!

I'll close with a couple of theological musings. Though I've plowed through most of Thomas Merton's works and part of the first book of Thomas Aquinas' The Summa Theologica, I spend a lot more time these days with Shel Silverstein! Sometimes in our fervent beliefs we feel that those who lean to the left or the right have some spiritual inside track. He wasn't the first, but Aquinas espoused "virtus in medio." He said to find that radical spot in the middle. Weigh each issue very carefully against the many works and teachings of the Church. But be very cautious about judging the acts of others. That's dangerous work. The problem is that sometimes when you're trying to be a radical voice from the middle, both sides kick you off the team! I love our faith, the liturgy, my traditional forms of prayer, and 2000 years of tradition. It gives me great solace to know that only one person was created perfectly, and the rest of us should use our journey to try and model that behavior. It's a lot easier applying basic Christian concepts to others than it is myself.

My other favorite philosopher wrote a book that I used to give every board member who served at St. Mary's. It's Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree. My favorite part of the book is the ending where the reader is left wondering if the little boy who benefitted from the tree's generosity ever really appreciated the sacrificial giving of the tree. It makes me pause to examine my own spirit of appreciation, and how well I've thanked others for the sacrificial effort they have given me, my own children, and who are now giving to my grand children.

Thank you all for the well wishes. I've put it in writing so you can hold me to it! I'm excited about becoming part of an effort that changes our world one child at a time. I'm

aware of the legacy that's been passed down to our care, and I'm looking forward to serving all of the great people involved. Help me do a good job!