

EL 530  
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Module #1

To me, the best kind of leader is someone who naturally paves the way for others, without necessarily meaning to. This type of leadership is the most compelling to follow because it is real, authentic, not polished up for show. My grandfather was such a leader. Intimately known to his adoring family as Dziadzi (Polish for “Grandpa,” pronounced “JAH-JEE”), Joe Zmikly led others through his immaculate example, and I, along with all the other Zmikly men who grew up admiring him, will forever be in his shadow. Dziadzi never meant to be a leader. Or maybe he did. He never sought attention for the countless selfless acts he committed daily, yet he never hid them either, as though he were bashful or embarrassed. I still wonder whether he lived his life deliberately to set an example for those who may have been watching or if he simply was living his life and just happened to be the best person I have ever met. Maybe that is the beauty of his leadership – it was simply too genuine to fake. The example he set was one that was real, doable, evidenced by the mere fact that he was real and he was doing it. To reiterate, the best kind of leader is someone who naturally paves the way for others, without necessarily meaning to; Dziadzi paved the way for me to be a man of humility, self-sacrifice, and love through his soft-spoken and earnest example.

Dziadzi was a man of deep faith. However, many people of deep faith do not inspire others to follow their example; what set Dziadzi apart was his genuine humility as he lived out his faith. Dziadzi was never one to point out to others what he was doing, regardless of how righteous his acts, so that they might do the same. Rather, he simply did what he thought was right, hoping to serve his God and family. When St. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the Gospel always, and when necessary use words,” he must have had my grandfather in mind. Dziadzi spread his faith and love for God not with his words but with his humble acts in his family and

the church. He was an active member of his parish's St. Vincent de Paul Society, feeding and clothing the poor, as well as an usher every Sunday morning and a parish coordinator.

I do not remember Dziadzi ever instructing me how to pray, when to pray, or even that I should pray, but nothing has had a more profound impact on my prayer life than peeking in his bedroom at night as a child whenever I stayed the night and watching him get on his knees every single night, without exception. That is the kind of humility that cannot be feigned. His leadership was not empty platitudes; he lived what he believed. I remember one time as a child spending the weekend at my grandparents' house, and Dziadzi teaching his family about being compassionate despite a racist culture. He did not teach us through direct preaching, however; he did it in his own soft-spoken, humble way. I was old enough at the time to understand that people of his generation were more apt to hold racist biases against black people, and I remember my grandmother ranting about how the black people were taking over her favorite restaurant, Old Country Buffet. Dziadzi replied simply but profoundly, "Well, they gotta eat too." He said just enough to make his point, but in a way that was gentle and challenging, not harsh or browbeating. I admired how he could make a point so poignant seem so simple and non-threatening. I believe his humility allowed him to do this.

Only a man with his humility could make his life so much about self-sacrifice because only a humble person understands that they are not the source of their blessings to begin with. Dziadzi was a man who truly lived for others, giving of himself constantly. He gave to his church weekly, which set an example for my father, which set an example for me. Making an offering to God was not optional for him; it was a central fiber in the fabric of his life, as he believed it was absolutely necessary to give back to the One who gave all good things. He also gave of himself. Whenever one of his children needed him for anything, he was there, whether it

was my father building his house or my aunt needing a tree cut down. Even at 80 years old, he would be up in a tree like a cat, cutting branches with a handsaw.

He gave of himself with no complaints, with no reservation. He was famous in our family for never having anything bad to say, which made it hard for anyone else to complain about anything. This was the essence of his leadership—rather than telling others not to complain, he simply did it himself, setting a precedent that others could not help but follow. I remember once when I was about seven years old, my father and I were baling hay on our farm, and Dziadzi (about 75 years old at the time) came to help, which was a feat in itself at his age. My job was to drive the tractor, pulling the wagon as they stacked the hay bales. My job was difficult, considering I could barely reach the clutch and the brake, and keeping from popping the clutch was my primary goal. At the end of the day, when we had the entire field stacked onto the wagon, six layers high, Dziadzi and my father sat on top, ready to go home. After an entire day of mistake-free driving, I popped the clutch, jerking the wagon forward, and vaulting my 75-year-old grandfather off the back of the wagon, falling 20 feet to the ground, landing on his back. I thought I killed him. Dziadzi just got up, brushed off his shirt, and said, “Let’s go.” He did not scold me, give me a disapproving look, or even try to teach me how to drive the tractor correctly. He simply showed me what it meant to be a man who gives of himself, serving others without complaining, regardless of the inevitable lumps and pitfalls that await anyone who takes on such a lifestyle.

Probably the most telling testament to Dziadzi’s great leadership was his ninetieth birthday party in 2005. It showed me the most important aspect of an effective leader: love. All five of his children, their spouses, and 25 grandchildren were there. It was like a funeral for a man who was still around to hear all the nice things everyone said for him. As a family, we

made him a book, every grandchild getting a page and every son or daughter getting a few pages. Reading through that book as a family was like taking a walk through his life, highlighting all the amazing qualities of this soft-spoken man who never sought out this kind of attention. Stories were told of little daily routines, like when he would come home from work and put his fingers under his daughters' bedroom door to let them know he was home and he loved them. Stories of larger events were revealed of when he was in the military during World War II. They were the kinds of stories that some people might be lucky to have a few of in their life; Dziadzi had a whole book of them. That day was when I realized just how special he was, just how brazenly he stood alone among his peers. I have never in my life seen my entire extended family as emotional as they were that day. Gruff men who were not even related to Dziadzi by blood were weeping like babies recounting the profound ways that he had touched their lives, the example that he set for them as men and fathers, and the love he had shown everyone in that room. And he did all this without making a scene, without drawing attention to himself, without celebrating his own countless accomplishments.

Dziadzi did not need to tell anyone what he believed – that he loved his family, that he believed in Jesus, that a man should be strong and loving – a person just knew just by watching. In my own profession, people should not have to guess at what I believe about education or children; it should be readily apparent to anyone who observes me doing my job. Students should know what I believe about them through the way I treat them, and when students are treated with love, respect, and high expectations, they are more likely to achieve than when they are merely told to do so. Likewise, teachers are more likely to treat students with respect and high expectations if they observe the amazing results that it produces from a colleague or even an authority figure. When they see someone living out their beliefs so authentically and producing

such results, they would be a fool not to do the same. People want to follow someone who is genuine, who is leading in a direction because they believe in it, a direction they would take even if no one else followed.

I think about Dziadzi a lot when I think about leadership. He was a simple man who desired to serve his community and raise his family, and the effects of his leadership are still felt today in hosts of people, even after he is gone. The impact he left on my father is one that my father now imparts to me and will someday be imparted to my sons and daughters. I do not think Dziadzi ever thought the humble, loving example he set would reach as far as it has and still does, but great leaders never realize the extent of their impact. As was stated earlier, the best leader is one who paves the way for others, without necessarily meaning to. Dziadzi was not a conventional leader, coaching an NFL football team, or being a business executive, barking out orders or casting an enchanting vision others might want to follow. Rather, he lived a great life and let others watch him. I think it is no coincidence that my favorite professional athletes are men with the same soft-spoken, hard-working attributes – men like Joe Dumars and Steve Yzerman. I hope to be the same type of leader Dziadzi was – someone who is humble, self-giving, and loving. Working in a school setting is the ideal place for this type of leadership.