



"In search of role models? Try the heroes you know": By CEP President Mark Hyatt

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In search of role models? Try the heroes you know

Twenty years ago this spring, Nike released a memorable TV ad featuring larger-than-life professional basketball player Charles Barkley. "I am not a role model," he declared, staring into the camera. "I'm not paid to be a role model... Parents should be role models. Just because I can dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids."

At the time, the controversial commercial sparked considerable debate across America about the place that sports hold in our culture and whether athletes deserve the pedestal upon which so many of us seem willing to put them. In 1993, Barkley's rival and fellow NBA star Karl Malone countered in *Sports Illustrated*, "Charles... I don't think it's your decision to make. We don't choose to be role models; we are chosen," Malone argued. "Our only choice is whether to be a good role model or a bad one."

For two decades, the debate has continued. From Pete Rose and Tonya Harding to Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong, and too many others, the sports pages have been disillusioning fans, both young and old, with one embarrassing revelation after another. For every Jackie Robinson and Cal Ripken, there seem to be dozens like Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens. It's gotten so bad, in fact, that in January, a columnist in *The Wall Street Journal* termed the times in which we all live as "our unheroic age."

Our students are not suffering from a shortage of heroes and role models today. We just need to teach them discernment. Remember good character has always been taught and caught. Karl Malone was right, but our young people need to look for the role models who will help them succeed as good citizens our nation depends on. They also must know the good ones from the bad.

I love athletic competition. In high school and college, I competed enthusiastically as a Division I gymnast and was as driven to win as any of my teammates or competitors. I remember and value the insights and encouragement that I received from my coaches. They were important influences on my life and certainly they helped to shape me. But that alone by any means.

On the contrary, my parents and teachers were just as important, if not more so. One quality that they shared with my coaches, though, was that they all actually knew me and cared about me. As I think about it, that may be a pretty good rule of thumb for students in search of a role model. First, look to those whom you already know.

In this sense, parents and teachers are the most natural candidates for this key role. But whereas parents ideally will spend decades shaping a child, individual teachers usually have only one intense semester or school year to make their mark. And unlike parents, who hopefully will have many chances to reconcile with their adult children for missteps made while raising them, teachers rarely get a second chance to undo a poor life lesson. The impressions they leave, good or bad, can be as lasting as they are difficult to reverse.

This teacher-student relationship in U.S. schools may never have been as potentially influential as it is today. Why? Because so many children now have one or two parents working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. As many parents have less time with their children and more stress, teaching discernment is falling on the shoulders of educators.

So, students are watching us, and frankly, we have to embrace it.

When I served 10 years in the role of a K-12 school superintendent in Colorado, I knew that potentially hundreds of pairs of eyes—belonging to students, parents and/or teachers—were trained on me even when I wasn't at work. In the express checkout line at the supermarket, for instance, I knew I'd better not have more than the 12 items allowed in my cart—or one of my students would surely be there counting. Similarly, at school, everyone knew my car. So I didn't dare park in a handicapped spot or make the mistake of having a radar detector on board. For educators as role models, school is never out.

Each fall, at the "back to school" meetings for all staff and faculty of the schools for which I was responsible, I made sure that everyone there knew how important they were in the character development of our students. To make my point, I used the acronym 'REAL' as a method to encourage them to share with their students who they really are and what has motivated them in their lives:

R - Reveal your inspirations. We hired the very best teachers and staff and were deliberate in character screening starting with the job application all the way through the final interview. So I felt comfortable encouraging our young people to really get to know the adults at our schools as actual people;

E - Engage in 'values talk'. I wanted our students to learn all about the virtues that our adult community valued since they were specifically hired to be role models, as well;

A - Act as if eyes are watching you. The job of being a role model didn't end when the bell rang at the end of the day. So I always stressed to my teachers and staff that those young eyes were probably watching them at the store, the restaurant, the ballgame, bowling alley, or wherever. Even now that I'm retired, former students invariably will spot me in Walmart or some other public place and trot over to ask me how I'm doing—so I'm still on duty as a role model.

L - Lead intentionally. Lead the kind of life worth emulating.

Teachers can influence us in ways we don't fully appreciate. I still remember every K-12 teacher and coach that I ever had. I remember the way they dressed, their posture, the jokes they told, and even the way they smelled. (A scary thought, I know!) But as educators, like it or not, we are in the "inspiration business", as they say.

Some years ago, I served as a tutor/mentor to three inner city boys in Washington, D.C. I asked each what he wanted to be when he grew up. All wanted to play pro basketball. When I told them that only a fraction of a fraction of youngsters ever get that chance, I asked what their Plan B was. To my astonishment, all three wanted to be janitors! Why? Because Mr. Jones, their school custodian, always greeted them in the morning and talked with them about life. So they respected him and wanted to emulate him.

I asked the boys if they had considered their teachers as someone to emulate. "NO", they replied. "Our teachers yell at us and call us 'crack babies'". When I shared this with their teachers, their response was; "they ARE crack babies—that's why I'm counting the days until my retirement."

No doubt there are multiple documented problems associated with children born to mothers on crack and this makes the classroom extremely challenging. Crack babies or not, they liked the adult who showed he cared about them and wanted to be that way when they grew up.

This tells me that plenty of children do care about the way people act, not just what they accomplish. This can be good motivation for us as educators and parents to be positive role models. In turn this can motivate our students in their studies.

In being good role models ourselves, we teach our students what qualities their future role models should have. Yes, our sports heroes need to understand their roles as models to our young people, But at the same time, our students must be shown and learn how to discern which models to emulate—on the playing field, in the classroom or school yard.

There's a lesson there. Wherever our kids go, they need role models whom they know care about them and who want them to succeed. And these adults need to live the virtues they hope to see in these children. As the 19th century artist and philosopher Elbert Hubbard wrote:

***No written word nor spoken plea
can teach our youth what they should be.
Nor all the books on all the shelves.
It's what the teachers are themselves.***

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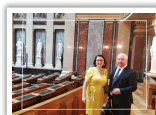
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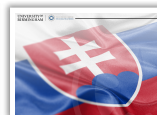
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