

Leadership Lessons Learned From an Addict

By Major Zeke W. Dodd

The three greatest leadership lessons that I have learned during my 11-year career as a Soldier, I learned from a drug addict. In early 2020, I stumbled upon a Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED)x® Talk entitled “Great Leaders Do What Drug Addicts Do”¹; and for the next 18 minutes, I received a crash course in what addicts learn when they start their recovery journey. Mr. Michael Brody-Waite introduces himself as an addict and explains how the three principles he learned in recovery—practice rigorous authenticity, do the uncomfortable work, and surrender the outcome—allowed him to be wildly successful in business and served as a model for his business vision and practices. I have found myself reflecting on those three principles almost daily since I ran across that video 4 years ago. As I’ve grown as a leader, I’ve discovered that my understanding of each of those principles has grown in depth and enhanced my understanding of what it truly means to lead authentically, vulnerably, and virtuously.

Practice Rigorous Authenticity

I was 30 years old the first time I held a firearm with the intent to harm myself. It was a dark time in my life. I was struggling with overwhelming anxiety, and I found myself falling deeper and deeper into depression. For more than a year, I had been lost. I felt no joy at work, with my family, or in my hobbies. I was struggling just to get out of bed, maintain regular personal hygiene, go to work, and exercise. And I was increasingly distracted at work, unable to think clearly or make sound leadership decisions due to the brain fog I was experiencing. However, because I forced myself to smile, laugh, and pretend that I was okay, no one else truly realized how much I was struggling. It took me more than a year to get assistance—but, luckily, I had a phenomenal military medical provider who recognized the depth of my pain and knew that I needed professional help. She encouraged me to seek therapy and psychiatry through an online virtual telehealth service—which, honestly, is the reason I am here today.

Through this experience, I have come to realize that my story and my testimony have meaning. I understand that I didn’t survive this experience just to keep it to myself but to share it with others, with the hope that it will resonate with someone else who is struggling.

Practicing rigorous authenticity is a daily challenge. It

means not hiding who you are and how you are feeling. It is a call to action to be who you truly are; to be vulnerable; to seek help; and to have real, deep, and uncomfortable discussions with your Soldiers and teammates.

Do the Uncomfortable Work

When I first listened to Mr. Brody-Waite explain the three principles he had learned in recovery,² I believed that doing the uncomfortable work was the easiest principle of all. I thought I did uncomfortable work every day; I completed physical training and other daily Soldier tasks that are often accompanied by discomfort due to the weather, fatigue, or other stressors. It wasn’t until I was halfway through my company command assignment that I realized that this is actually the toughest principle in practice.

Participating in difficult conversations with people who I respect and care about is uncomfortable work for me—but that is a baseline requirement for all leaders. As leaders, we must routinely engage in uncomfortable conversations with subordinates about their performance, personal challenges, or other issues that warrant our time and energy in order to make sure that we correct undesirable behaviors and support our Soldiers and teammates when they need us.

My most uncomfortable work situation consisted of a mediation session involving two loyal, hardworking subordinates who I respected and cared about. I understood both of their sides of the story and why they acted and reacted the way they did. However, I knew that this was an important moment—both for them and for me. It presented an opportunity for me to practice doing uncomfortable work and to support two of my Soldiers. I properly prepared by determining a time and location, thoroughly writing notes, and setting ground rules before we started. I shared vulnerably and encouraged them to do the same. The session was successful, but I knew that the situation would take a toll on me and I needed to properly plan for mental and emotional recovery time; therefore, I had set aside time following the session to conduct regular work that required little thought or energy.

Your uncomfortable work is likely unique to you. I encourage you to truly understand it through regular reflection. I also encourage you not to shy away from it but to successfully tackle it through proper planning, preparation, and recovery and to grow as a leader and as a person through each challenge you face.

Surrender the Outcome

Surrender is not a word that we tend to use in the profession of arms—and for good reason. However, it is important for our health and for the profession that we, as leaders, surrender the outcome. We cannot control everything, but we can control how we react to everything. Life is unfair and often extremely humbling—and Soldiers and leaders are not exempt. Sometimes we do everything in our power, exhaust all available resources, and still fail. That’s just how life is. But it is important to set an example. We must maintain a calm and stoic demeanor, demonstrating that no matter how rough the sea or how challenging the task, we will not allow it to affect who we are, how we act, or how we treat people.

A command and staff briefing situation can be used to illustrate the appropriateness of a “surrender the outcome” approach. Everyone wants the command and staff slides to be designated “green”; the meeting goes fast, the boss is happy, there’s no stress or worry. However, the slides must sometimes be designated “red” to force leaders to recognize that there is a problem, either with systems or leadership. Both can be fixed, but only if we trust the process and surrender the outcome.

I didn’t realize it until much later in my career, but I actually learned the “surrender the outcome” lesson when I was a young first lieutenant. Coming up on my 1-year mark as a rifle platoon leader, I knew that my time with the platoon was winding down. I made the necessary preparations and began to fantasize about what I felt certain would be my next job—the scout platoon leader. After all, I was a competent tactician, had just earned my expert infantryman’s badge, was well-regarded in the battalion, and was a physical training stud. However, during my senior rater counseling, my battalion commander informed me that I would be placed in the headquarters and headquarters company executive officer position. I was devastated. That job was the opposite of the cool job that I wanted. I would be a paper pusher, working maintenance, supply, systems and processes, while someone else got placed in the platoon leader position that I deserved! I allowed myself to wallow in self-pity for 2 weeks, and then I went to work, devoting every ounce of time and energy that I could to the job. I have come to learn that, although the scout platoon leader is the position what I *wanted*, the headquarters and headquarters company executive officer position is the one that I *needed*. In that position, I learned valuable leadership and Army lessons that have made me successful in a security force assistance brigade and as a company commander. Now, when I look back, I wouldn’t trade that job or that experience for anything.

Conclusion

Four years ago, I happened to watch a TEDx Talk that ultimately changed my life. It forced me to reflect on myself, my leadership style, and my purpose. I continue to challenge myself with the three principles of practicing rigorous authenticity, doing the uncomfortable work, and surrendering the outcome each day. I often fail; but each time I practice, I learn and grow as a leader and as a person. And that’s what I learned from a drug addict.



Endnotes:

¹Michael Brody-Waite, “Great Leaders Do What Drug Addicts Do,” TEDxNashville Talk, YouTube®, 13 June 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUnRKf2CemA>>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

²Ibid.

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