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Leadership and Parenting

In our programs, we define leadership as: "*...the ability (or competency) to influence positively others*". Since we're usually working with organizations, we add "...[to influence] *individuals and groups...*" This takes us into the very complicated area of teamwork, where our influence may affect different people in different ways. Finally, we append "*...for the accomplishment of common goals...*" which adds another chapter or two to most leadership textbooks about agreement on appropriate goals -- how do we agree about what's appropriate? Pretty sticky business this leadership stuff -- top-line, bottom-line, triple-bottom-line, etc.!

But for purposes of this writing about leadership and parenting, we will stay closer to the first part of the definition: how can we exercise our positive influence in perhaps one of the stickiest areas of all, being a good parent. So what makes for a good parent? What do we need to know about our very important leadership role as parents of productive children, who can then transmit a positive influence to their children, and so on down the generations.

Freakonomics by Steven Levitt (and his co-author Stephen Dubner) is not strictly about parenting. "Freakonomics" itself is a bit difficult to define.

However, the subtitle "...[exploring] the hidden side of everything" gives one the flavor of the inquiry. Levitt has impressive credentials as an economist. He was first trained at Harvard and holds a Ph.D. in economics from MIT. Levitt teaches at the University of Chicago, home of Milton Friedman and a host of world-famed specialists in monetary economics. He is not one of them, although he won (in 2003) the John Bates Clark Medal, awarded every two years by the American Economics Association to the best American economist under 40. Most economists, like myself, have been taught to explore the subtleties of market pricing, or of incentives and motivation for workers, or of the effects of taxation and monetary policy on growth. But Levitt is described in the book subtitle as "*A Rogue Economist [who] Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*". One chapter is entitled, "What Do Schoolteachers and Sumo Wrestlers Have in Common?" Another is "How Is the Ku Klux Klan Like a Group of Real-Estate Agents". Yet a third is: "Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms?" Heady stuff this brand of economics, what? Yet the authors include two final chapters on "Perfect Parenting", and inspire this paper. The analysis follows:

Levitt is, first and foremost, a data freak. Using large-scale data from the late- 1990's U.S. Department of Education Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), Levitt analyzed the factors that were related to academic success of more than 20,000 children from kindergarten through the fifth grade. Levitt is careful to separate the concept of "correlation" from that of "causality": factors may be highly correlated, which means that they move together, without one causing the other. A regression analysis can't tell you whether it snows because it's cold, or whether it's cold because it snows. But if you pile on a good number of factors that are inter-correlated into a study with lots of data observations, you can begin to get some notion of the causalities involved. (Cold + humidity + clouds – the "but not always" factor = snow!)

For example, here are 8 factors that are strongly correlated with children's academic test scores in the ECLS:

- The child has educated parents.
- The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.
- The child's mother was 30 or older at the time of her first child's birth.
- The child had average-or-better birth weight.
- The child's parents speak English in the home.
- The child is natural to the parents (i.e. not adopted).
- The child's parents are involved in the PTA (Parent-Teacher's Association).
- The child has many books in his/her home.

And here are 8 factors that are not highly correlated:

- The child's family is intact (parents together).
- The child's parents recently moved into a better neighborhood.
- The child's mother didn't work between birth and kindergarten.
- The child attended Head Start.
- The child's parents regularly take him/her to museums.
- The child is regularly spanked.
- The child frequently watches television.
- The child's parents read to him/her nearly every day.

There are some surprises here, and other factors seem self evident. Some deserve some explanation and clarification and may be co-correlated. For example, parents who are educated and better-off economically may postpone parenthood until in their 30s. Both adopted children and low-birth weight children may have been early-parented by disadvantaged mothers, who had children early.

But the interesting result implicit in the data is that children's early success in school is more a matter of who their parents are than what they do. Being educated and relatively wealthy is an indicator of success in general – and successful parents are more likely to have successful children. However, moving to a better neighborhood doesn't improve a child's chances in school, even if the school in the new neighborhood is a better school. What if the child attends Head Start, is read-to every day, and regularly goes to museums with parents? Culture-cramming may be a foundational belief of obsessive parents, but the ECLS data show little or no correlation between these activities (by themselves) and test scores.

So where does that leave us in terms of leadership and parenting? The fundamental tenet of our leadership programs is that our behaviors determine the impact of our leadership styles; and that regardless of styles and preferences (i.e. who we are), we can improve our positive impact on others by changing behaviors according to proven models of leadership competencies. So what about our parenting competencies? Can we improve them as well?

Well, hold on, nearly all of our leadership program participants are successful, otherwise they wouldn't have the support (especially the funding) of the organizations who send them. They are relatively highly educated, relatively wealthy, and relatively smart folks – and they belong to organizations which are relatively successful in the marketplace. So what can we tell them – or remind them of – that will be helpful in their personal

development? The following learnings seem to be among the right ones, according to what our participants tell us in their feedback:

1. Our executives are successful, but they could be more so if they paid more attention to their impact on others.
2. They may be successful on the job, but may not be as happy at home. Fully one-half of our participants set goals around improving their relationships with their families.
3. They don't have to change who they are, but they could be even more successful if they were more intentional about their behaviors at work and at home.
4. Being better bosses, colleagues, spouses, and parents means being more attuned to others' needs as well as their own, and that this tuning in and listening will make them more successful, at work and at home.
5. No matter how successful they are, or think they are, they will be better with good sources of feedback around them.

So what can we learn from *Freakonomics*? Many things, I believe. One is to look beyond surface causality, since everything may have a hidden side. Again, correlation is not the same as causality. Just because things happen together doesn't mean that one causes the other. If we increase marketing efforts and sales rise, that doesn't mean the marketing was successful. If we cut expenses on people development, and profits rise, that doesn't mean success, and may even produce future failure as the negative effects of lack of development opportunities set in.

It also seems obvious from Levitt's analyses that we who lead companies are biased for success. So his conclusion for us would be: Let's not screw it up! Let us be intentional in what we do and try to have a positive impact on those around us. Let's be purposeful in that regard, measure our behavioral success in impacting others with data from feedback about others' perceptions. Is what we do good for others, does it help build others' skills and well-being, does it help show them the way? In the words of Stephen Covey's *The 8th Habit*, do we find our voice in what we exemplify, and do we help others find theirs?

Of course, Levitt reminds us, there's always the "huge random effect that rains down" on the best parenting, and leadership efforts. We have all known some intelligent and devoted leaders and parents whose child or employee went off the rails. And the opposite, of course, where a person succeeds despite his parents', or his company's worst habits.

Levitt draws out the picture of two young boys – they are real cases:

"There is a white boy raised in a Chicago suburb by parents who read widely and involve themselves in school reforms. The father has a decent manufacturing job, often takes the boy on nature hikes. His mother is a housewife who will eventually go back to college and earn a bachelor's degree in education. The boy is happy and performs very well in school. His teachers think he may be a bona fide math genius. His parents encourage him and are terribly proud when he skips a grade...The family even holds literary salons in their home.

"The black boy is born in Daytona Beach, FL, and his mother abandons him at the age of two. His father has a good job in sales but is a heavy drinker. He often beats the little boy with the metal end of a garden hose. One night when the boy is 11, he is decorating a table-top Christmas tree – the first one he has ever had – when his father starts beating up a lady friend in the kitchen. He hits her so hard that some teeth fly out of her mouth and land at the base of the boy's Christmas tree. But the boy knows better than to speak up. At school, he makes no effort whatsoever.

Before long he is selling drugs, mugging suburbanites, carrying a gun. He makes sure to be asleep by the time his father comes home from drinking, and to be out of the house before his father awakes. The father eventually goes to jail for sexual assault. By the age of 12, the boy is essentially fending for himself."

Luckily the black boy was a proficient football and basketball player, enough to get an athletic scholarship at the University of Texas (Arlington). He wasn't quite good enough to aspire to the NFL or NBA. But taking his studies seriously for the first time, he found he liked them. He graduated in 2 years from UT, took his Ph.D. in economics at Penn State, did post-doctoral work at the University of Chicago, and was hired as a Harvard economics professor at age 25. His work parallels that of Levitt and looks at the hidden reality behind black underachievement. His name is Roland G. Freyer, Jr. *The Economist* lists Fryer as one of the top 8 young economists in the world.

The white boy from Chicago also studied at Harvard and went on to get a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Michigan. He also became a professor at age 25, but resigned 2 years later, and is now serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole as prisoner number 04475-046 in the federal Administrative Maximum Facility in Florence, Colorado. His name is Theodore (Ted) Kaczynski, also known as the *Unabomber*.

Our conclusions from the *Freakonomics* analysis become clearer:

- We are likely to be successful parents to our children just as we are – unless we are served up some kind of Unabomber or Bourne Ultimatum syndrome that is beyond our control anyway -- and in this case, we need to ease up on our guilt.
- If we can learn to apply more positively influencing behaviors at work, we can also extend them to our home lives. One of these is listening skills. (I am reminded of the participant who called to tell his wife about all the interesting things he was learning at our leadership program. The reply was something like: "You had to go all the way to San Antonio and pay all that money to find this out? I'd have told you for free...")
- Feedback, feedback, feedback, at home and at work. Our kids can tell you a lot about our parenting skills. For a start, ask them what was the most important thing they ever learned from you. You might be surprised at the response.
- Plans and goals are important. What do we want for our children, and what do they need from us? They should be part of our family goal plans. (One of our participants in Colombia wanted to enlarge the international-ness of his children's viewpoints. But he lacked some English-language skills for international transfer, and he was afraid to leave the safety of his national environment. So he began an intensive program of language training for himself and his family, shook off his fears and put himself on the line for international assignment. Today he is one of the senior members of his management team in his company, working in New York City.)

Leadership skills and parenting skills go hand-in-hand. If we are given the opportunity to be parents, we have a double responsibility to society and to ourselves for demonstrating positive influencing skills that, hopefully, will be passed down to our future generations....

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~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.