

# SHOW YOUR INK

**Stories About Leadership & Life**



TODD DEWETT PhD

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To Cheryl—thanks for being my best friend. I am grateful for your love and support and look forward to creating many more wonderful memories. To Laura, Paxton, and Parker—thanks for giving me such a wonderful, loving, and supportive family! To all of the people who inspired these stories—thank-you for allowing me to use your experiences and our shared experiences. They have taught me a great deal. To Mom and Dad—thank-you for showing me that real transformation is possible.

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## Introduction

They say you are not fully grown up until you lose a parent. I was there to hold my father's hand as he took his last breath. Five years later, I was privileged to do it again, this time with my mother. At thirty-eight, for better or worse, I was fully grown up. I will never forget the bravery they both showed during their final days. It lit a fire in me. The fact that life is finite became amazingly real. Once you understand this, you face a choice. You can choose to live the rest of your life in fear of how little time you have left, or you can choose to live the rest of your life fearlessly. I chose the latter. I am writing this book in honor of my mother and father and in the hopes of motivating you to make the same choice.

I began writing *Show Your Ink* with a focus on the power of being authentic. The book title was inspired by my decision to stop hiding my tattoos in professional contexts. In many ways, authenticity is every bit as powerful as competence. Through stories, I'll argue that great leadership begins by improving yourself before trying to lead and improve others. Your IQ and competence might be stellar, but they can be easily wasted if you are not as human and approachable as you are smart. In fact, I specifically discourage too much impression management. Making productive connections is about being real.

Success in life requires you to develop yourself in a manner that helps others see the complete you: the strengths *and* the imperfections, the accomplishments *and* the continued striving. At work, only when colleagues see you as human will they be open to you as a genuine leader and not merely a person occupying a position above them. I wanted *Show Your Ink* to make the case that people love—and often crave—authenticity in others.

As I began to collect my thoughts and write the stories, I realized that I wanted to share a wider array of ideas. In fact, you, my audience, forced me to do this! I would tell my stories at events, and people would come up afterward to tell me their stories and explain what they got out of my stories. What I learned is that people who want to grow and improve might see a multitude of themes where I had only seen one or two. As a result, I decided to expand my focus. So, thanks to you, I believe the book is now more useful with a broad focus on life, relationships, and success, not just authenticity.

*Show Your Ink* was originally just a phrase intended to remind us to be authentic. Over time, it became something much bigger. It's really about becoming a better version of yourself. The stories highlight a handful of classic variables known to help you achieve just that. From authenticity to sacrifice to humility to hard work, the elements of success are not a mystery. We just have to remember them and stay focused. Enjoy.

## Story 1

### Let Them See the Real You: *Show Your Ink*

Authenticity is an easy topic to understand, but it turns out to be a terribly difficult one to embrace. There is a battle taking place. On the one hand, there is you and your idiosyncratic desire to be expressive in life. On the other hand, there are the requirements and expectations placed upon you by the groups that surround you. These groups include work, home, school, church, and all other groups or places you frequent. The needs of these two competing systems (you and any given group) are not perfectly aligned. The result is pressure to conform to the needs of the group.

Knowing this makes you smart. Bending as necessary makes you savvy—to an extent. To help the systems around you function, it makes sense. After a certain point, however, we overindulge in meeting the needs of the groups around us. We are what we believe they need of us, but the person we supply is only a muted, half-honest version of ourselves. To some, it might seem counterintuitive, but what the systems around you really need is less conformity and a bit more authenticity.

The more others see and respect the real you, the more they will be receptive to your unique ideas and contributions. However, to deviate from expected behavioral norms is to take a risk. That's why I like to say that you have to earn the right to be authentic. You have to earn the right to be fully you. You do this through great performance. When you finally make it happen, it's amazing how many people will want to form productive relationships with you.

It all started for me when I was twenty-five years old. I was working for the world's largest consulting firm. I was young. I was hungry. I wanted to advance. To make that first promotion happen quickly, I knew I needed a big win. For some time, it eluded me. Then, finally, thanks to luck and a little clever thinking, I found it. Working with a large manufacturing client, I had figured out a way to reduce a machine's changeover time from three hours to less than three minutes. This change increased the client's production capacity exponentially.

Huge win! Lots of visibility. My boss was thrilled. I could taste the promotion.

A few weeks later, I was sitting in the office, working, when the telephone rang.

It was my boss. He said, "Todd, would you come to my office for a moment?"

"Sure, be right there," I replied. Wham! I set the phone down and grinned ear to ear. *Here it comes! Promotion time!* I didn't really walk down the hall. I skipped. The feeling of elation was fantastic.

I knocked on his office door, and he waved me in. "Hey, Todd," he said with a half smile. "Would you shut the door, please?"

I shut the door. *Let's do this!*



“Have a seat, please,” he continued, his smile now gone. “Would you mind telling me what in the hell is on your left arm?” He pointed to my arm. His anger was palpable.

I was wearing a long-sleeved, button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. I pointed to the snake protruding below my sleeve. “This? That’s a snake,” I said nervously.

“I don’t care what it is,” he continued. “I do care that the client noticed. They didn’t like it. They questioned how we hire people. One of them even said they thought it looked like a part of the male anatomy.”

I felt like the air had been knocked out of me.

He was fuming but went on, “Listen carefully. If you want to stay at this firm, you will never again let your tattoos be seen by the client or here at work. Do you understand me?”

I faced an important moment. Stand my ground since I had done nothing wrong, or recognize the importance of managing impressions. I hesitated for only a moment. Then, I folded like a cheap suit.

“Yes, sir. Of course,” I replied. “Of course.”

Ten years later, I was at the back end of a career as a management professor and the front end of a career as a speaker. One day, an old friend called. Kimberly was a good buddy I knew back in high school. She was coming through town on business and suggested we get together for lunch.

The day we were scheduled to meet, I had a local speaking gig. I wore my typical uniform: khakis, a black button-down, shiny dress shoes, and a super-spiffy sports coat.

I always wore acceptable business attire. I did this in order to meet the expectations of my audiences, which were mostly corporate white-collar professionals. I even shaved regularly. I also wore professional attire in order to cover up my tattoos. I had learned my lesson from that fun incident when I was twenty-five. I didn’t want to freak out more conservative audiences.

The gig that morning was fun as always. I then headed to lunch. When I walked in, I was still wearing the sports coat I had worn while speaking.

Kimberly and I hugged, sat down, and talked briefly about our children.

Then she asked, “Was it a good event this morning?”

“Awesome,” I replied. “A group of accountants. Huge fun.”

She looked at me carefully, smirked, and said, “Good for you. You know what? That sure is a snazzy jacket.”

I thanked her, knowing she was ribbing me. I ignored the comment and ordered a beer.

She continued anyway. “Did you wear that while you were speaking?”

I nodded.

Kimberly laughed and asked, “When did you become a jacket guy? Fancy, fancy. You’re not a jacket guy, Todd. You know it, and I know it.”

I smiled and explained that I needed to meet the professional expectations of my audience. I told her I did not want to unnecessarily alienate people. I shared the whole story about getting busted for exposing my tattoos when I was twenty-five. I talked about why managing impressions is important. My goals, I explained, were to be safe and give people what they expect.

She laughed again and said, “You want to be an actor? I thought you wanted to be a speaker. I mean, maybe you’re right. That does make you socially aware, but you know what? You’re not the same guy today that you were at twenty-five. You’re in a different industry, and you’re far more accomplished. Plus the world has changed a lot too.” She paused, and then delivered some of the best advice I’ve ever received. She said, “I’ll bet if you take off the jacket, roll up your sleeves, and show your ink, they will like you even more. That’s when they’ll really start to listen. Let them see the real you.”

I offered a very skeptical “Really?”

With calm conviction, she said, “Yes. Know why? Because people like real.”

*People like real. Interesting,* I thought. I felt she was being honest but not necessarily accurate. I viewed her advice as intriguing but maybe a little reckless. My beer arrived, and I changed the topic.

After our lunch, I couldn’t stop thinking about her comments. Over time, the more I thought about it, the more I saw the truth. Kimberly was profoundly correct. I was a tenured professor, so I felt I had the security to embrace being as authentic as I wanted to be. I decided to stop caring as much about managing impressions professionally. Life was too short for anything else.

It made me a far better speaker. I know that because the more honest and open and real I became, the more people in the audience did the same. Soon enough, people from the audience began staying after the show to share their stories. The stories they shared blew me away. I remember the association president who told me about her double mastectomy and the beautiful tattooed roses that grew on her chest. I remember the man

who told me that losing one of his testicles to cancer was the best thing that ever happened to him because it taught him that life was precious.

It took me a while to become fully authentic, but I did—and so can you. Now it's your turn, so let's get started. This book is simple by design. Read each story, and then grab something to write with and start reflecting on how you can use the information in your own life. By the time you finish the last story, you'll have the rough plan you need to start working on an even better version of yourself.

## Story 2

### Using Your Mistakes: *For the Love of Ham*

Too many leaders get lost inside the status bubble. That's the invisible barrier surrounding all leaders that makes it more difficult for people beneath them to feel comfortable being honest and forthright with them. You can be a good leader and a kind person, but the status bubble still exists as a by-product of the position you occupy. The status bubble kills real conversation, turns candor into censoring, and heavily distorts the feedback leaders receive.

It also makes it difficult to deal effectively with your mistakes. The status bubble makes it easy to hide them and not talk about them. Consequently, it robs you of the chance to use your mistakes to build rapport with your team. The following is a great example of this that I encountered several years ago.

I was sitting in my office one day when the phone rang. It was the president of a company. His name was Mike. He told me he was calling to discuss some employee issues at his company, a quickly growing professional services firm specializing in human resources.

When we finally met at his office, Mike explained, "I feel like our growth has strained the employees. We feel less like a family these days. People comply, but I'm not sure they feel as committed as they once did."

As a jumping-off point for our discussion of morale and engagement, I asked him to tell me about the types of things he was doing to recognize and reward his employees.

Mike rattled off several programs the company had used in prior years. Each basically amounted to handing out trinkets from some sort of corporate catalog: coffee mugs, T-shirts, stress balls, and golf shirts. Following each effort he described, he would say, "Well, I think we did that for a few months, but I'm not sure people felt very motivated, so then we tried..."

As he was explaining what the company had done, Mike seemed to notice my disapproval. I don't hide what I'm thinking very well. I must have rolled my eyes at the thought of coffee mugs and golf shirts.

He smiled and said, "You don't seem impressed. Fair enough, but wait—there is one thing we do that everyone loves."

I replied, "Great. What's that?"

"Well," he continued, "every quarter, we have a company meeting. I get on stage and do the big tap dance—you know, revenues, margins, profits—the whole state-of-the-company speech. When I'm done, I bring up a handful of employees who have been nominated by their peers as the employees of the quarter."

I responded enthusiastically, “Nice. I’ve seen many versions of these ceremonies, and they can be quite effective. So, what do you give them?”

Mike sat back, relishing the moment. He paused. Then, like a proud father, he said, “I give them a ham.”

My enthusiasm disappeared. I frantically suppressed my desire to giggle. I had just met this person, and I was in interview mode. The meeting turned into a nice, long coaching gig with his team, but that day, I didn’t know what the outcome would be. What I did know was that it would be rude to laugh.

I composed myself and asked, “So, how’s that ham thing working for you?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “They love it! It’s one of the few things around here that everybody really appreciates.”

I had my doubts. In the following weeks, I proceeded to conduct various interviews with his employees, facilitate a few focus groups, and chat with folks by the water cooler and the picnic tables out back. I inquired about a number of topics, especially the ham scheme.

What do you think I learned about the ham scheme? The ham scheme was the biggest shared source of ridicule and condemnation in the entire organization! *Shared* is a big word in my world when you’re talking about things such as teams and organizational culture. At this company, the employees didn’t always agree about everything, but they sure did agree that the ham scheme was ridiculous. It had become the symbol for how disconnected management really was. Any time the employees wanted to make a joke about management, you’d better believe there was a ham involved.

The fascinating part was how utterly disconnected the president seemed to be. The status bubble can sometimes distort feedback to the point that the person lost in it is completely blind. The ham was a widely embraced joke, and yet Mike thought everyone loved and appreciated the quarterly ceremony.

Soon after I learned the truth about the ham, the next quarterly meeting rolled around. Hundreds of employees filled a large auditorium. I sat in the back, watching the event unfold. Mike took the stage. Customers, margins, profits! He did a great tap dance. The audience seemed interested and appreciative...until the tap dance ended.

Mike began the recognition ritual by reiterating the importance of hard work and achievement. It quickly became a nonverbal train wreck. Employees stared at their shoes, looked at their watches, rolled their eyes, and shook their heads. Mike seemed oblivious. He announced the names of that quarter’s three victims. Polite applause followed, completely void of real enthusiasm. The three hapless winners took the stage.

Mike handed each one a ham, smiled, thanked them, shook their hands, and posed with them for a picture. To this day, I don't know where he got the idea that hams would make a great gift. I do know that everyone hated them. The recipients were actually the butt of the joke twice: once while on stage receiving the ham, and again when the photograph of them appeared in the company newsletter the following month.

I watched as the three unenthusiastic "winners" exited the stage. They were not smiling. The audience was uninterested. I was fascinated. I resolved then and there to learn the fate of those three hams. When the meeting was over, I quickly stalked those individuals, and I learned what became of the hams. When I did, I knew I had to do my job, so I walked into Mike's office.

"Mike, I need to tell you something," I said. Before he could speak, I realized what I really wanted to say and corrected myself. "No, I think I need to *show* you something. Would you come with me for a minute?"

He looked puzzled but agreed. He followed me out of his office, through the cubes, out the front door, and around the back of the three-story brick building that was his company. In the back sat an industrial-size dumpster. I knew that no words were necessary. I opened the huge top of the dumpster. Sitting inside were two of the three hams he had handed out.

Mike looked astonished, then appalled, then furious. There he stood, in a very expensive suit, hands on the rim of this massive dumpster, trying to get a better look inside. To me, it appeared he was about to jump in to retrieve the hams. I thought I might have to restrain him. Instead of jumping in, he just turned away slowly and then began cussing. Loudly. Mike was a refined man, but pushed too hard, he could use words that would make a trucker blush.

It turns out that using expletives is something of an art form, and this man was a true artist. Mike began to rattle off a long list of off-color statements to convey his feelings. It was ugly—and kind of funny. Here is some good advice for practitioners of coaching: you can't coach extreme emotions; you can only allow them to dissipate and then engage the person rationally when he or she falls back into a normal range of emotions. So I waited.

A minute later, Mike ran out of colorful expressions and stopped to take a breath. He looked at me, exasperated, and said, "Well, what do you think I should do, Doc?"

I did what all great consultants do: I made something up right there on the fly. I said, "Here's what you do. You call a meeting. Let's make it next Tuesday at two in the afternoon. Tell everyone in the company to meet you in the parking lot in front of the building. All hands on deck—no exceptions. Be there or else, but don't tell them why; just tell them to be there. Now, when two o'clock rolls around next Tuesday and everyone is gathered in the parking lot, I want you to show up, on the roof, three stories up, looking down at them—and I want you to bring a ham."

I told him to give some version of this speech: “Hi, everyone. Can I have your attention, please? Look, I found the hams in the trash. I can’t believe it took me this long to figure out that you folks don’t like the hams. Frankly, I’m a little embarrassed. When I figured this out, I realized that you probably know each other better than I know you, which is why, from now on, I will not be passing out hams! I’m going to put together a cross-functional group—someone from each department—give them a little budget, and let you guys own the process of coming up with the criteria and the awards for the employee recognition program. I look forward to seeing what you come up with. No more hams!”

Of course, you can’t advise a guy to get on a roof and give that speech while holding a ham without also advising him to end the speech by chucking the ham. It just seemed appropriate to me at the time. Did you know that when those hams are manufactured, they are injected with a lot of liquids? Just a side note. Anyway, I told him to do this.

He looked at me, a bit stunned, and asked, “How much am I paying you?”

I did not remind him. Instead, I started a great conversation about the need as a leader to be human, to be real, to laugh at yourself, and to make it OK for others to laugh at you too. Confidence and competence are spectacular, but so are humility and a little self-deprecation. After a small amount of arm twisting, he agreed.

The following Tuesday finally arrived. At 1:00 p.m., I was with Mike in his office, working on the speech. He was nervous. I knew this had to work, or my tenure as an advisor and coach to this organization would be over. We could hear the throngs of employees moving through the office as they began to assemble in the parking lot in front of the building.

Minutes later, I stood on the roof behind Mike and out of sight of the employees below. He looked at me and said nothing, but his facial expression screamed, “You’d better be right, pal!” I smiled and handed him the ham. He turned around and stepped closer to the edge.

The crowd of employees gasped at the sight of their leader standing on the roof of the building. The speech was short, honest, and funny. He delivered his words with sincerity and vigor. He even laughed at himself a little while speaking. He did a spectacular job of speaking from the heart.

When I had coached him earlier, I suggested it might be fun—assuming the speech went well—to end by carefully dropping the ham over the edge of the building. I thought it would be funny and symbolic of the change he was describing. However, when he saw how strong the reaction was to his speech, he got excited. He decided not to drop the ham. Instead, he reached back and threw a long Hail Mary into the middle of the hundreds of employees below.

I nearly died. I had images of someone getting knocked out, lawsuits, and so on. Thankfully, nobody was hurt by him chucking the ham with all his might. How do you think the gathered hundreds responded?

Cheers! There was a massive outpouring of shared positive emotion, the likes of which had never been seen before in the history of the company. In an instant, this man, who had fallen prey to the status bubble, now seemed real. He was three stories removed from them, but for the very first time, he didn't feel removed. He had crossed a rare leadership hurdle. He was still clearly the leader, but now he also felt like a member of the team. Mike raised his hands above his head in victory as the employees laughed right along with him.

I finally walked to the edge and looked down at the parking lot. I saw a crowd of people dancing around an awful mess of ham goo. Everyone was smiling and laughing (except the kind janitor, who knew he was going to be asked to clean up the mess).

Mike looked over at me and smiled. I smiled back, knowing my gig would continue a little longer.

At the next quarterly meeting, I once again sat in the back of the massive auditorium. Mike took the stage and began the tap dance. When he finished, he said, "As you know, there will be no hams today." People giggled and applauded. Mike then introduced the team that had been appointed to come up with the awards.

Sadly, the new team basically decided to once again hand out trinkets from a corporate catalog. I thought their decision stood no chance of motivating people. I was a little right and a little wrong. As I watched the ceremony, I recognized something. While the crowd might not have been enthralled with the gifts presented, they didn't sport the looks of disinterest and outright disgust I'd seen during the ham presentation.

I thought about it, and it made complete sense. They now owned the process. Their voices had been heard. Making fun of the trinkets being handed out would be the equivalent of making fun of themselves. After the meeting, I hung out in the cafeteria, by the smoke-break area, and out back by the picnic tables. There were no ham jokes as there had been before. Instead, I heard employees talking about how they could tweak the awards process and make it even better next time. I heard people taking ownership.

I also heard many folks making positive, supportive comments about the president. In the following days, I also saw several employees speaking to him more openly and comfortably. The status bubble had clearly sprung a bit of a leak. With one flying ham, Mike had become more approachable and real—a leader and not just a boss. He had learned to admit when he was wrong and laugh about it—and everyone loved it.



### Story 3

#### **Learning to Get Over Yourself: *A Night with the Men in Tights***

It's funny how intelligence can blind us. Don't get me wrong; IQ is wonderful, but sometimes it seduces us into lazy thinking. We stop questioning ourselves. Sometimes, we go further and project onto others by assuming they think like we think. This is partially arrogance and partially a simple reality of human psychology. In either case, it's dangerous. You need to wake up and get over yourself if you wish to truly connect with others.

No matter how high your IQ, no matter how strong your accomplishments, no matter how many accolades you've earned, sometimes you need to get down from that pedestal, close your mouth, and open your ears a bit more. Strive to see the unique individuals around you and the interesting package of traits and skills they possess. When you do, they tend to notice, and it's amazing how much more they begin to see you as interesting and worth listening to.

One of my former students, Dave, was kind enough to share a great story one night in class. The students were in the middle of a robust discussion about motivation. It was a blast. In my classroom, it was the custom to just jump in and debate. Students were encouraged to speak up and participate. Have something to say!

In the middle of a great exchange between two other students, Dave slowly raised his hand. Understand that Dave was a wonderfully atypical student. Most MBA students are in their twenties or thirties. Dave was in his forties and far more seasoned professionally than the others. An introvert by nature, he was the sole hand raiser in this particular class. When he raised his hand, everyone quieted down in anticipation because his comments were always useful and enjoyable.

I called on him. He cleared his throat and began, "I just wanted to tell the class that I agree with what you've been saying tonight, but I think it's important to note that understanding these concepts in class is one thing, while acting on them correctly in practice is far more difficult."

I nodded in agreement.

"As you all know," he continued, "I was recently promoted to my first true executive role. I've been very fortunate and have avoided any significant screw-ups or embarrassments as I've been promoted through the ranks—until now." He paused, and the other students perked up. He sighed a little, smiled, and said, "After the promotion, I started thinking about motivation and the need to say thank-you to the team for their hard work and accomplishments. I wanted to find just the right time to show my gratitude as their new leader." Dave's new role put him in charge of twenty "code jockeys"—his phrase, not mine. His direct reports were all managers of different teams charged with various types of software programing. He joked that he was now king of the geeks.

He continued, “After the first few months had passed and a number of legit small wins had begun to pile up, I knew it was time. I called the team together on a Thursday afternoon for a quick huddle right there in the middle of the office. It was not scheduled, so everyone was curious. I told them what fun it was to be the new chief of this crew. I told them that the progress they were making on various projects was impressive. I thanked them for their hard work and told them I really wanted to show them how much I appreciated their contributions. I announced that following the close of business on Friday, I was taking the whole group...to happy hour!” He asked my class, “How many people on my team do you think showed up?”

One kid piped up, “All of them—it’s free booze!” Everyone laughed.

“Not quite,” Dave replied. “Only half of the team showed up. I didn’t understand why, and I was a little mad at first. As the night wound down, I found myself talking to the one member of the team with whom I had worked in the past. This was a person I trusted and who knew me well. A confidant. I admitted that happy hour did not work out the way I had intended. The feedback he gave me was surprising, but then blatantly obvious.”

His friend said, “Here’s the thing, Dave. Not everyone likes to drink. Not everyone likes to socialize at bars. Further, I know for a fact that at least half of the group who did show up didn’t come out tonight to share a few drinks with the boss. They came out because they feared losing points with you back in the office if they didn’t show up.”

Dave continued speaking to the class. “Wow. I had inadvertently created a negative outcome when all I really wanted to do was something positive. It was tough, but it was good feedback. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt a small bit embarrassed by one of my professional decisions. When I got back to the office the next week, I didn’t look folks in the eyes as I normally would. I spent some time thinking about how I could say thank-you more effectively. I wanted to get it so right the next time I did something similar that they wouldn’t even remember the little happy-hour incident.”

“Eventually, the idea came to me,” Dave said. “This was going to be brilliant. A few months later, following a few more successful performance milestones, I found another great opportunity to say thank-you to the team. I walked out in the middle of the cubes and offices and shouted for everyone to come join me for a huddle. They gathered around, a few heads hanging. No doubt more than one thought, *Great, here comes another happy hour!*”

Dave said to his team, “Your work continues to be impressive. I really do appreciate the effort you’re giving. I’d like to show you how much I value your efforts and contributions. That’s why I intend to take the whole team...canoeing!”

The classroom burst into laughter. As did I.

Dave laughed with us and then said, “I actually did that.” He shook his head. “Almost to a person, the same half who went to happy hour joined me for the canoeing trip. Looking

back on it, they must have been scratching their heads and thinking, *Now he wants us to give up a weekend and get sunburned together?*”

“Following our day on the river, predictably,” Dave admitted, “I received very similar feedback from my friend on the team. People didn’t really show up to have fun as much as they did because they felt obligated to show up. Realizing that I had basically done the same thing twice, though now on a much grander scale, I felt stupid. The first time, I wasted a couple hours. This time, I wasted a weekend. I’d never questioned my people skills in the past, but now I felt like an idiot. How could they trust me if I seemed so aloof and out of touch?”

Dave said he went back to the office, once again unable to look the team in the eyes. Days later, when he started to gain back his confidence, he noticed something new. He sat in the office, just staring at the team while they all worked. He just watched them operate in their natural habitat. Then it hit him. An epiphany. A breakthrough.

He confessed to my class, “I realized the obvious. Up until then, I had merely been projecting me onto them. I was assuming they liked what I liked. Huge mistake.” He paused and then grinned, “I like to drink. I like to canoe. Sometimes I like to drink while I’m canoeing.” Everyone chuckled.

“My breakthrough,” he continued, “was in understanding that my interests had nothing at all to do with their interests. I had to get over myself, stop thinking about what I wanted, and try to see them as unique individuals. When I realized this and started looking closely at them, I noticed something. It was right there in front of me the whole time, and I had failed to see it. I noticed that every member of the team, in their workspace, had a very clear indication that they were a huge fan—of professional wrestling!”

He described the scene. “One guy had a bobblehead, the next a poster, the next a figurine. Two guys had mouse pads with professional wrestlers on them, and several had signed photographs. It was right there in plain sight the whole time.”

Dave was something of an intellectual. He told the class that he thought professional wrestling was about the stupidest thing mankind had ever created. He also, thankfully, now understood that his view of professional wrestling didn’t matter. What did matter was that the team shared this interest.

Dave said, “Months later, when the team had once again completed several significant milestones and were deserving of a sincere thank-you, for the third time during my tenure as their new boss, I walked out into the middle of the office and called a huddle. I could see the concern on their faces as they gathered around. I think they were worried I was going to ask them to go skydiving or something. I told them thank-you for all of their hard work and quickly pulled out tickets to the freak show. I invited the whole team to join me the following month at the local coliseum to see the men in tights do their thing at the wrestling show.”

Laughter erupted at the thought of a team retreat to see a professional wrestling show. Dave asked, "This time, what percentage of the team do you think showed up? That's right, one hundred percent. Not only did they show up, but they smiled and laughed comfortably. They looked me in the eye more than usual. They called me by my first name and punched me on the arm as if I was one of the guys. I've never had so much fun being out of my element and laughing at myself as I did that night. I could tell by the way they acted I was clearly still the boss, but now I also felt like part of the team." Dave paused. "Thank God I learned to get over myself."

Dave described how the team's chemistry seemed to shift when they got back to the office the following week. He had figured out that sometimes leadership requires you to get over yourself. Sometimes, showing your ink is about sharing something new about yourself; other times, it's about seeing something new and unique in others while laughing at yourself. When people know you're capable of appreciating the real them, it's funny how much more they become interested in listening to and helping you.

## Story 4

### **Eating Humble Pie: *Real Friends Know When to Smack You***

It's funny. In many ways, our society begs you to put your best foot forward, to be aggressive and self-promoting to the point of being self-aggrandizing. Projecting strength is everything! Not quite. Humility makes you honest. It makes you human. It makes you real. You must understand that appropriate use of humility does not detract from your strengths and accomplishments. It amplifies them. False modesty is ridiculous, but a little bit of honest public humility is golden. The very best leaders—dare I say, the very best *people*—are a beautiful mix of awesome accomplishments and sincere humility.

Do you know what's even better than understanding the power and necessity of humility? Having a friend around who will smack you when you when you forget these things.

As a professor, I had a healthy ego. Most professionals do, but professors are particularly bad. They become self-deluded, believing in their own righteousness. Humility often escapes them. I fell prey to this as much as anyone. I was tenured quickly, won a bunch of awards, and was very popular with students. My head was swollen more than most.

Then, to make things worse, I began a career as a professional speaker. Look at me! Listen to me! It's a truly amazing vocation, but you have to keep your ego in check. I know that now, but it took some time. Speaking started as a fun side project for me but quickly became a serious endeavor. My head continued growing. It is vitally important you believe in yourself, but you can take that too far. A few years ago, I did just that.

I was at the Philadelphia International Airport, waiting for a flight home after a speaking gig. I was sitting alone, reading a novel.

A man approached. "Dr. Dewett?"

I looked up and replied, "Yes?"

"I just wanted to say hello. I saw you speak once and really enjoy what you do," the man offered. He shook my hand and smiled warmly.

I smiled back. On the outside, I was completely calm and cool. I thanked him for being kind and told him that I appreciated his support. We chatted for maybe a minute before we wished each other well, and he walked away. I had been collected and polished on the outside, but on the inside, it was a different story. That man couldn't have known this, but he was the very first person to recognize me in public—you know, as if I was a *someone*. I was blown away! I felt like a somebody—hell, I felt like a celebrity. To this day, I've been spotted like that exactly twice, but that day, when it first happened, I was a king! My head swelled even more.

Two days later, I was back at home, grocery shopping with my oldest son, Paxon. As we cruised through the produce section, a woman approached and said, "Hi, Dr. Dewett. I just have to say, I love your radio show! Keep it up!" She shook my hand and was gone.

Paxon knew I had a radio show, but he never thought much about it until then. He said, “Did you know that lady?”

“No,” I replied.

“Wow,” he gushed. He thought his daddy was special. The swelling accelerated. It was becoming a burden to carry around such a ridiculously overinflated melon.

The next day, I was quoted in the *New York Times*. My legs began to buckle under the weight of my ginormous noggin.

A few days later, I had lunch with one of my favorite cousins. We grew up together, knew each other very well, and knew all of the stupid things we had done as kids. Sarah was passing through town on business, and we were able to schedule lunch and catch up. I hadn’t seen her in several years, and I was excited to reconnect.

After exchanging stories about our families, Sarah asked me about my little side business. “So how’s it going with all that Dr. Dewett stuff you’ve been working on? I saw online that you’ve been speaking a lot. That right?”

I gushed excitedly, “It’s been crazy.” I rapidly told her about several recent gigs, the fact that I was now flying around to speak in different places, that I had been spotted in the airport and then in the grocery store, that I had quotes in the national press—blah, blah, blah!

I was in the middle of a seriously overindulgent response to her question when Sarah grimaced just a little and held up both hands as if to say, “You can stop now.” If you knew Sarah like I do, you would know that she’s soft-spoken and not the type to do anything confrontational. So I knew that holding up her hands in that manner was a very strong signal.

“What?” I asked.

“Look, I think it’s really cool what you’re working on, Todd,” she began, “but you gotta remember to keep both feet firmly on the ground. I know who you are. I know who you were back in the day. I’ve seen you eat mud. I’ve seen you get busted by your mother when you flushed three-bean salad down the toilet at Thanksgiving. I was there the day your pants fell down when you were eleven while you were running the football in the peewee league.” She grinned and leaned forward. “All your new stuff is great, but don’t let yourself believe too much of the hype. OK?”

I nodded.

She glared at me, apparently not convinced I had heard the message. She continued, “I mean, it’s great that you went to college forever and wrote a book. Woo-hoo! But don’t you forget, you’re also the kid who took a dare in the third grade to eat a—”

“OK!” I interrupted. “Point taken. Now can you keep it down, please?”

“I still can’t believe you kiss your mother with that mouth,” she giggled.

She was mostly serious and a little funny and entirely correct. As she delivered the message, I could feel the air slowly seeping out of my head. It only hurt for a split second. Then, it felt like a great relief. We laughed it off and had a spectacular lunch. I picked up the tab even though she tried to stop me. I bought her lunch, but she’d done something far more amazing for me. She gave me much-needed perspective. She gave me a swift kick in the pants. She used only a few words, but she effectively reminded me to lighten up and remember to laugh at myself.

No matter what your personality type, I encourage you to view humility as a skill. Skills are things we can learn. You can also boost your odds of embracing a little humility by putting the right people around you. I now make a point to stay in touch with my cousin Sarah regularly. Your turn: try to name at least one person with whom you should interact less because they only feed your ego. Now name one person with whom you should interact more because they keep you grounded. Thanks, cuz!