

A Great Teacher in Tough Times

A mother's wisdom • BY FRED HARBURG



Fred Harburg is a private consultant, writer and speaker in the disciplines of leadership, strategy and performance coaching. He has held numerous international leadership roles at IBM, GM, Motorola and Fidelity Investments. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

I grew up under the tutelage of a great teacher. She was a pillar of the school system in the dusty New Mexico village of my youth, and she was my mom. The wisdom she provided ignited my passion for learning and inspired all of us who were her students to overcome challenges and uncertainty — good lessons for current times.

Lesson One: Use all the resources available.

As a boy I heard the “flour sack dress” story many times. New Mexico became the 47th U.S. state in 1912, only five years before Mom’s birth. The Dust Bowl storms and the Great Depression devastated this fledgling part of the U.S. when she was a schoolgirl. Her resilient and enterprising mother used empty flour sacks to make dresses for her daughters. Mom had the pictures to prove that some of those sacks were actually tasteful and attractive. Inventiveness did not stop with dresses, either. They sold eggs from the hen house, collected wild lamb’s quarter from the county lanes for salads, planted a garden and orchard and canned the results.

To apply this lesson in your enterprise, make sure you are using all available resources at a time when budgets are sure to be cut. Turn your business leaders into faculty members. Use the business improvement efforts under way in your organization as case studies. Optimize your classrooms by treating them as though filled with airline seats; rather than flying empty, find the best-use alternative.

Now more than ever, make sure that your curriculum speaks to the greatest needs of the business to ensure that it is “no frills.” Be inventive in looking for ways to make the most of your resources, including the minds and skills of your talented staff.

Lesson Two: Widen the lens to see more of the picture.

Mom often exhorted us to broaden our perspectives and take different actions if we wanted different results. When we were tempted to lick our wounds and complain about our circumstances, she showed little sympathy for this victim mentality. At one point, the water supply for our irrigation system dried up, and we were advised to close the farm down. Rather than giving up, our folks used the best engineering technology of the time to locate and extract a new water source that not only saved the farm but propelled one of my

uncles to later pursue the study of geology at Harvard, a world away from our little New Mexico farm.

Technology has been promising to provide better-quality learning at a lower price for the past decade. Now is the time to fulfill the promise. But before you spend dollars to save dollars, ensure you are using technology that is appropriate for the outcome you need. Rather than holding an Internet-mediated conference call, consider the potential impact of well-structured and powerful one-on-one conversations between your supervisors and the people they lead. In times of uncertainty, the value of overcoming a sense of alienation through meaningful face-to-face interaction with those around us increases exponentially.

Lesson Three: Share what you have.

My mom was a diligent champion for those in need. She was never public in her display of generosity, but she was faithful in providing for others. I only discovered some of what she did for others when they told me about her kindness years after the fact. When times are tough, there is nothing less appealing or disappointing than a zero-sum mentality. Organizations that survive and thrive are those whose people recognize that we are in this together. It is both right and savvy to look for ways to help others and to offer up your scarce resources in times of turbulence.

When the learning organization takes the lead in modeling genuine magnanimity, it wins the respect of others and builds the esteem of the members of your team in a significant way. It has been deeply pleasing to receive calls from former colleagues who recall the ways we reached for each other and looked for ways to give, rather than grab, during tough times of downsizing and reductions. This time of difficulty will pass, and when it does, you will have both your self-dignity and the respect of others because of the quality of your character during the challenge.

Tough times test souls. My mother’s age group was called the “greatest generation” because it reached for something greater than the kind of greed and self-interest that is partially at the root of our current economic crisis.

Challenge is the word of the day. We are being tested, and we don’t yet know what the final result will be. If we are smart, we will use all of our resources, we’ll widen the lens and we’ll share what we have. Just like the greatest generation.

Thanks, Mom. **CLO**