

The Unending Journey



**WSBA President
Steven G. Toole**

As you know by now, I am all about lessons I learn from my life and my experiences. With this in mind and with my year as president of the WSBA drawing to an end, I found myself reflecting upon my experiences of this past year and the resulting lessons. When I started this journey late last September, I wrote to you about givers and takers and serving with soul. As the months progressed, diversity, inclusion, and empowerment were added to my themes. I also talked about being willing to be wrong and recognizing that I don't have all the answers. Another concept discussed was change being an opportunity, not something to fear. Further, I shared my belief that we are never too old or set in our ways to change. Professionalism and taking the high road were also central themes during the year. Additionally, I opined about the value of learning from our mistakes, acting from our heart, and being accountable.

These are all concepts and themes I hold dear and use to guide me on a daily basis. Throughout this year, I was able to appreciate that these concepts are universal and are by no means unique to me. They apply to all of us, whether we are looking at ourselves as individuals, bosses, colleagues, volunteers, spouses, committed partners, parents, or good friends and neighbors. Additionally, there are a handful of other concepts that have been the basis of repeated lessons learned by me this year. The first of these is the ability or trait of *Listening*. I sometimes feel as though I am a broken record when talking about this. However, in my mind, listening

is an essential foundation of being a good leader. Too many people, particularly in the legal profession, like to hear themselves talk and pontificate. They believe they have all the answers and are not open to listening to what others have to say or contribute. In actuality, listening is not enough. You also have to hear and then be willing to trust that there are more ways to resolve an issue or problem than the one



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that you personally came up with.

What I have learned this year is that when you are making decisions that can affect your entire association, your community, or even your state, pride of authorship is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that you come to the just and right solution. This is particularly true when it is a group, such as a board of governors, that is making the decision. At the end of the day or a couple years later, no one is going to remember whose idea was followed. They are only going to look to see if the direction taken by the association was a good one.

The second concept of which I have been reminded time and again this past year is to *Respect Others*. This comple-

ments the first concept of *Listening*. For an organization to operate most efficiently, it is critical that everyone not only be respected, but that they feel as though they are respected. When you truly are listening to the statements and points of view of a person, you are demonstrating respect for what he or she has to offer. In doing so, you are empowering that person or those people to be part of the solution and not the problem. The statement you are making is not only that you hear them, but you respect and value what they have to say. They then know that they are important players in the decisions to be made and in the actions to be taken. Additionally, your organization now has the benefit of a myriad of suggestions and ideas that can go a long way to best advancing the policies and goals of the association and, particularly when difficult decisions need to be made and people need to be creative and to think outside the box, having a larger source of input is going to enhance the likelihood of resolving your problems.

Then there is the concept of *Commitment*. It is absolutely impossible to be around the numerous WSBA staff and member attorney volunteers without recognizing the tremendous commitment that everyone has to the mission statement and guiding principles of the Association. These people with whom I have had the great fortune of working this past year are absolutely remarkable. As for the WSBA staff, they give 110 percent to their jobs. They don't clock-watch; they don't tell you that something can't be done; they don't belittle your ideas. Rather, they put a smile on their faces and tell you they will

immediately get to work on the project — and they do. No matter how difficult the task, they come up with solutions. What more could anyone ask?

As for the attorney volunteers, this is also an incredible group of people. They don't get paid for what they do. They receive no glory for serving on a board, committee, or task force, or for attending Board of Governors' meetings as a liaison for a section, or a specialty, minority, or county bar association. They have their own law practices and families in need of their time and attention. Yet they expend hours and hours of time and play a vital role in the governance of the WSBA. Many of them are the worker bees of the Association (and I mean this in a very complimentary sense), doing the needed research and legwork and then giving much-needed advice to the Board of Governors. The governors could not make the frequently difficult decisions they have to make if not for the commitment and hard work of these volunteers. These volunteers often serve as the conscience of the Association and enlighten the governors to issues that never may have entered their minds. What they have to say is not always popular. Sometimes it complicates what originally appeared to be an easily resolved problem. But in the


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end, a much more comprehensive and fair solution is reached, with all points of view being considered. The Association ends up with a much better finished product.

Leading by Example is another theme and lesson that repeated itself throughout this past year. I have always known and understood this concept. Yet it is often very tempting to pass off the responsibility and let others take on the work. Now, there is nothing wrong with delegating and, in fact, delegating is essential. However, it is also essential that as a leader you be willing to take on the task yourself. It is critical that you be willing to lead by example; walk the walk as well as talk the talk. I was constantly amazed throughout the year to see volunteers who had more than a full plate offer to do even more work on specific projects, frequently under tight time constraints. Once

the first person volunteered, others would follow. So, we had both *leading by example* and *commitment* — and these traits were not just limited to attorney volunteers, but were also repeatedly demonstrated by the WSBA staff. *Leading by example* has a positive impact on anyone who is able to observe this behavior; it is contagious. It is how people go beyond what is expected and do the extraordinary.

This leaves us with the final concept that I want to comment on, *Serving with Soul*. As I mentioned, I started my year as president talking about *Serving with Soul*. People who *serve with soul* are those who give of themselves and serve others without a second thought. They don't expect remuneration or acknowledgment. They don't even think about it. They are just doing what comes naturally — they see a person in need or a job to be done and they act. In my year as president, I have had the great fortune of working with many people who have *served with soul*. It is not my intent to name each of these people, as there are too many. However, it is reassuring to know that there are so many committed and giving people who value access to justice and the rule of law and are willing to dedicate their professional lives to accomplishing these goals and to improving the delivery of justice. They are tireless in their efforts and are part of the reason that the Washington State Bar Association is, in my opinion, the best and most progressive mandatory bar association in the country. We have a great national reputation for our vision and accomplishments in the areas of diversity, leadership training, and our commitment to civil legal aid.

Having a dedicated, creative, and passionate executive director, staff, Board of Governors, and force of volunteer member attorneys, and having a bar that so greatly values these principles are what enable us to stand apart. However, as many have said before, we are merely on a journey and, in the grand scheme of things, we are early in this journey and have a long way to go. Indeed, this is a journey that will never end. Regardless, we must keep moving, keep progressing and leading the way for others, both within our state and outside it. I thank everyone who has joined me and guided me on this journey this past year. It has been an opportunity of a lifetime. 

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