

A Father's Unity of Life

by James B. Stenson



Let's start off with a crucially important concept: unity of life.

You are one person, not two. You are the same man, both on the job with your colleagues and at home with your family and friends. You cannot live two lives; you must be the same person in both spheres of responsible operation.

Men who are weak and ineffective fathers tend to split their lives between work and family. That is, they live as producers at work but consumers at home.

On the job they dedicate their powers to serious, responsible activity; but at home they rest passively in pleasurable recreation. In the workplace, their character strengths operate at all-out exertion -- everyone sees and respects their sound judgment, sense of responsibility, tough-minded perseverance, and self-control. But at home, their inner strengths rest on idle, set aside (so to speak) for the day, and thereby hidden from their children's eyes.

Successful fathers do not live like this. They are smart, effective leaders at home as well as on the job. Their strengths of character impress their children as much as their colleagues at work. Their devotion to their family, in fact, gives meaning and purpose to their strenuous life of professional work. The main purpose of their work is the welfare of their family, and their children know this.

In short, a successful father exercises leadership at home as much as on the job -- and in roughly the same ways.

What does this mean? Let's first look at how a man typically exercises effective leadership in the workplace, and then let's turn to see how the same attitudes and behaviors apply to leadership at home.

Leadership on the job

What are the traits found most commonly among successful business and professional leaders? I ask you here to think about the best bosses you've ever worked with or met in your line of business, whatever it may be. What attitudes and actions characterize an outstanding leader, maybe the sort of leader you aspire to become?

Here are some traits that I think you'll recognize....

- An outstanding professional leader has a clear long-term vision about the company's future success, and he communicates this goal, at least occasionally, to everyone who works with him. He thinks 5 to 20 years ahead, and this goal-setting drives him and his team forward

-- for he knows that people's efforts are only effective when they're focused on some future achievement.

- He maintains a strong sense of teamwork. He looks mostly for strengths in people and sees his job as coordinating those strengths toward the team's collective endeavors. He helps his colleagues, especially subordinates, develop their strengths and skills as they carry out clear-cut responsibilities.

- He is service-oriented. He knows that professional success means constant delivery of high-quality service. A business works best when it's dedicated to effecting change for the better in the lives of clients or customers, and his job is make this happen effectively and consistently.

- Though he thinks of the future, he pays attention to present detail, the nitty-gritty lying before him. His eye for detail derives, in fact, from his long-term vision and commitment to service.

- He constantly sets priorities, and sticks to them. When faced with a problem, he asks, "How important will this be a year from now, five years from now, or later?" Within this framework, he shrugs off or ignores unimportant snarls and minor setbacks.

- He knows how to concentrate, to focus entirely on what's before him. He works to eliminate unnecessary distractions.

- He tends to see problems as challenges, not just hassles. He has a kind of sporting spirit about his work, and he knows that any sport involves occasional bruises, mistakes, and disappointments. He learns from mistakes, his own and others', and helps his subordinates do the same.

- If resources are scarce, including time, he works smart. He makes the most of what he has available, including slivers of time here and there. He doesn't procrastinate; papers don't just sit cluttered on his desk. He thinks before he acts, then acts intelligently and decisively.

- He takes personal responsibility -- no excuses, no alibis, no whining, no "victim complex," no shifting of blame. He accepts the consequences of his free decisions and actions, including mistakes.

- When he's unsure what to do, he secures the best advice he can and weighs it seriously. Then he acts. In any event, he never lets indecision lead to inaction. His job is to act -- that's what he's paid for.

- He's conscious of his authority, and comfortable with it. He has rights because he has duties. He knows his rights come with the job.

- He has self-respect and self-confidence, and these traits inspire respect and confidence from others.

- He rewards good effort, making praise as specific as blame -- and just as sincere. He affirms and encourages his people, pressing them to put out their very best regardless of shortcomings. He sees part of his job as keeping obstacles out of his people's way, eliminating whatever holds them back from their best performance.

- When he must correct others, he corrects the fault, not the person. He comes down on the foul-up, not the one who did it. He corrects people privately, never in public. If he goes too far, he apologizes. He puts fairness ahead of his ego.

- He's a good listener. When people come to him with problems, he gives them his undivided attention. While listening, he tries to understand them: their motives, their experience (or lack thereof), their needs and uncertainties. He reflects: "Is there a bigger problem underlying this little problem? What is it? How can I help?"

- When he thinks about his people's professional development, his frame of reference (consciously or intuitively) comprises the virtues: sound judgment, responsibility, perseverance, self-discipline. He wants and expects his people's effort to grow in these areas. His company depends on it. He knows his business is only as strong as the people who work for it.

- He's a professional. That is, he sets high standards for his own performance and does his best work whether he feels like it or not. In a sense, he's strong enough to ignore fatigue, anxiety, or temptations to slack off. He enjoys his top performance; his delight in life comes as much from his work as from his leisured recreation.

- Consciously or otherwise, he knows that no ideal becomes reality without sacrificial effort. His high personal and professional ideals, in fact, transform his hard work into a sporting adventure.

If you've been lucky enough to work with a boss like this, you know how enjoyable the experience can be. Bosses of this caliber teach their people an enormous amount, and very often win their warm devotion.

Many workers, in fact, come to see such a boss as a type of father figure. The man's combination of vision and practicality, firmness and understanding, self-esteem and spirit of service, competence and desire to keep learning, seriousness of purpose and lightness of touch -- all equally characterize a great, dedicated father.

Here's the point: If you are now this kind of professional man (no matter what kind of work you do), or if you aspire to this ideal for your future leadership at your job, you can be a great father. The attitudes, values, and behaviors described above -- effective leadership on the job—apply as well to life in the family. A great father is a great man, a man of integrity, and such men do not live divided lives.

Leadership at home

Having looked at leadership on the job, let's turn to see how these same traits apply to a man's role of leadership at home with his family. Here's what we see....

- He puts his wife first. In his priorities, her happiness and welfare are uppermost in importance, and his children know this. They know it because he leads them by his own example to love, honor, and obey their mother. If they ever fail to do this, they answer to him for it. (This is more than half the "secret" to effective fatherhood: striving to live as a devoted, supportive husband.)

- He has a constant spirit of team collaboration with his wife. She is his partner in a collective team enterprise. Together they endeavor as much as possible to present a united front to the children. They check with each other about decisions, large and small, that affect the children's welfare. They draw on each other's strengths and, in different but complementary ways, they support each other.

- He works with his wife to set and maintain a long-term vision (20 years ahead) about the children's growth in character, no matter what they later do for a living. Both spouses think of their children as grown-up men and women, adults with virtue: conscience, competence, responsibility, self-mastery. This distant but clear ideal forms the basis for teaching, practice, and correction now.

- He corrects his children's faults, not them personally. He "hates the sin, loves the sinner." He combines correction and punishment with affectionate forgiveness, understanding, and encouragement. He is neither weak nor harsh but rather affectionately assertive. He loves his children too much to let them grow up with their faults uncorrected.

- When he must correct anyone in the family, he does this personally and privately whenever possible. He does not chew people out in public.

- He's not afraid of being temporarily "unpopular" with his children. Their long-term happiness is more important to him than their present bruised feelings from correction. He's confident that their present resentment will soon pass, and that someday they will understand and thank him for his principled corrective efforts.

- He encourages his children, showing and explaining how to do things right, and how to do the right thing. He directs rather than manages, and makes praise as specific as blame.

- He's conscious of his authority, which is as weighty as his responsibility. He does not permit electronic entertainment to undermine that authority or undo his lessons of right and wrong. He keeps the media under discriminating control, allowing only what serves to bring the family together.

- He goes out of his way to listen to his children, and he pays close attention to their growth in character. He monitors and guides their performance in sports, chores, homework, good manners, and relations with siblings and friends. He knows what goes on in his home and inside the growing minds of his children.

- He respects his children's freedom and rights. He teaches them how to use their freedoms responsibly, and he exercises only as much control as they need. He sets limits to his children's behavior, draws lines between right and wrong. Within those limits, the children may do what they think best; beyond the lines, they begin to infringe on the rights of others -- and this he will not permit.

- He wants his children to be active, and he knows that all active people make mistakes. He leads his children to learn from their blunders. He teaches them that life involves intelligent risk-taking, including the risk of error, and that there's nothing wrong with mistakes if we learn from them.

- He sets aside his fatigue, anxiety, and temptations to slack off -- putting his fatherly duties ahead of self-interested pursuits. He sets aside the newspaper to help with homework. He goes without t.v. to set a good example. He lets his kids work with him around the house even when they mostly get in the way. Like a good boss, he's always available to help and advise; consequently, his children sense he would drop anything if they really need him. He's willing to put off a life of leisure until his children have grown and gone; now, while they're still at home, their needs come first.

- He shares conversation with his children until he and they know each other inside out.
- Without being a bore about it, he uses certain terms from time to time in family life: integrity, personal honor, honesty, personal best effort, family honor.
- He gives his children a sense of family history and continuity. He tells stories about grandparents and forebears -- people of quiet courage and heroism.
- He lets the children know his opinions and convictions about current events and their likely future drift, the future world his children will live in. He explains, as best he can, the past causes and future implications of present-day affairs.
- He is open to his children's suggestions, their "input" about family decisions. When matters are unimportant, he accedes to their preferences. But larger, more important matters are decided by the parents. He'll let his children decide what dessert to have or what game to play, but he and his wife will decide which school the children attend and what t.v. programming is allowed in the house.
- He takes his wife's judgment seriously, especially in matters pertaining to the children. He sets aside his ego and acknowledges an evident fact of life -- most of the time, she's right. At the very least, she's probably on to something. This includes his performance as a father. He does not let pride blind him to truth.
- When he has caused offence, he apologizes. He puts justice ahead of his ego.
- Habitually he punctuates his speech, especially toward his wife, with please, thank you, and excuse me.
- He draws strength from his religious faith and love for his family.
- He knows that time passes quickly and he hasn't much of it. So he makes smart use of scant resources. He makes the time, even small slivers of it here and there, to live with his children.
- His life as husband and father is, to him, one of noble, self-sacrificing adventure. As long as his children are in his care, he will not quit or slacken in his efforts to form their character. He will protect and provide for his family no matter what the cost, for they are the meaning of his life, the object of his manly powers, the center of his heart.

Children with a father like this, wholly supported by a great wife, have a fighting chance of becoming great men and women. They grow to honor Dad and Mom, live by lessons learned since childhood, and pass these on to their own children whole and intact.

Have confidence. Other normal men have become fathers like this, and so can you.

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