# Miss Foley

Health 9: USC1 Health Promotion **Leadership**

**The Best Leader I Ever Knew**

**And what we can learn from him**

The best leader I ever knew died recently. I want to share some of the lessons I learned from him with those of you not fortunate enough to have known him.

At his funeral, I spoke with the woman who had been his office manager in what was to be his final career. "Whenever we went anywhere together" she said, "and met with people who had worked for him before, they always said to me 'You're lucky. Frank's such a great boss' and that they'd love to work for him again." What inspires that kind of loyalty in others? How did he learn it?

**The Navy**  
Frank was a typical kid, growing up in America's heartland. A smart boy, whose parents made him do his homework, his chores, and his music lessons. He graduated second or third in his high school class, depending on who you asked. He left home for the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland just prior to the start of the Second World War.

The attack on Pearl Harbor compressed the rigorous four-year course of study at the Academy into three years and he went off to war at 22. He earned a Bronze Star during the war, the third highest combat medal the US Navy awards. He told me once, much later, about the teamwork the men in his department had shown that had saved them from repeated attacks from Japanese fighters and kamikazis and had been responsible for his medal. He never mentioned that he had trained those men and built their sense of teamwork.

After the war, he went back to school and earned a Masters Degree in Petroleum Engineering. Not many people in his profession had advanced degrees then, but he always loved learning and he felt it would help his career.

After the Korean War, and the birth of his fourth child, Frank made a career choice that severely limited his chances of becoming an Admiral, but allowed him to spend more time at home with his wife and kids. He said he never regretted that choice. I believe him. Finally, after a 30 year career, he retired from the Navy as a Captain (equivalent to a colonel in the Army).

**Because it's there**  
When he retired from the Navy, he looked for something to do. He took some classes at the local community college and ended up teaching math there. He took a mountaineering class at the college and, at age 55, climbed to the 14,410' summit of Mount Rainier. He made five more ascents as a rope leader and became a member of the all-volunteer Olympic Mountain Rescue team. I remember one story he told me about a couple of "kids" who had gotten lost in the mountains and his team had gone in to find them. These "kids" were in their forties, but he was in better shape and he was 20 years older.

**Second Career**  
With 30 years experience, he easily obtained his Professional Engineer license in several states and spent the next 15 years as a marine/mechanical engineer. Many of the managers who hired him were younger. Some questioned his ability to learn new things or to keep up the pace. He quietly proved them all wrong. And he received another US patent for one of his ideas.

I had the pleasure of succeeding him as Engineering Manager of a design engineering firm. Although two men had held the position between us, everyone in that company who had known him still had the highest personal and professional respect for him - from the company president to his former secretary.

**Retirement?**  
Retirement for Frank didn't mean sitting around. He worked on his golf game, took up cross-country skiing, and remained active in his church and his community. He provided research and technical assistance to his wife in authoring three Navy history books.

As the Director of the local Naval Museum, he planned and supervised a move from the museum's decades-old home to a new space a few blocks away. Irreplaceable artifacts, from a flattened bullet to a mock-up of a submarine conning tower, were moved without loss. The move was completed on schedule.

**Listen to your mother**  
The final leg of his working life began, innocently enough, on a trip to the mountains with his wife. On the way home, they stopped into an antique store and he noticed a cello. He remembered the cello lessons he had taken as a boy and wondered whether he could still play. He practiced, took lessons, and practiced some more. He auditioned for his local symphony and was awarded the third cello position. (There were only three cellists in the small orchestra.)

Frank got deeply involved in the symphony organization, as he did with everything he considered worth doing. He was elected to its Board of Directors and eventually became their President. By the time he played his last concert with the symphony, he has been so successful in building the orchestra that he was playing seventh cello.

In of his favorite pictures, he is already in his tuxedo and doing some last minute practice; his three year old grandson is sitting facing him and 'playing' a plastic violin.

So what made this ordinary man such a great leader?

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**The Best Leader I Ever Knew (cont.)**

**Leadership Lessons**

**Leadership**   
So what was it about this ordinary man that made him such a great leader? Was he born with it? Did he learn it? Why would people, literally, follow him into war? How did he earn the respect and loyalty of sailors to admirals; from secretary to president; from golf buddy to school board president? You only had to work with him once to know he was special. Even those who disagreed with him recognized that, but what was it about him? To this day, I don't know. However, I do know some of the things he did. These are the things that can help all of us be a little more of a leader.

**He knew what he wanted to do.**

It is awfully hard to get others to do what you want if you don't know what you want. If you manage a customer service center, is your goal to have the lowest cost operation or to answer all calls within 90 seconds. The goal isn't as important as knowing what it is.

**He told people what to do, not how to do it.**

He was a very smart, well-educated man, but he knew he wasn't smarter than everyone. He encouraged people to think, to innovate, to be creative. He didn't blindly accept what you came up with, but he expected you to come up with something appropriate.

**He did his homework.**

Before starting a new challenge, he always tried to find out what others had tried that had succeeded or failed. He researched the obstacles and opponents. He tried to give himself the best chance of winning by learning as much as could at the beginning. He was always learning and always thinking.

**He led by example.**

He pushed his people hard. He demanded a lot of them. But no one ever worked harder than he did. He was the first one in and the last one to leave. And he worked hard the whole time he was there. He knew how to play, but he knew how to separate that from the job.

**He demanded excellence, not perfection.**

He expected you to work as hard as he did and to be as committed to the goal as he was. He didn't expect you to do as much or as well as he did, he insisted, however, that you do as much and as well as you could.

**He took care of his people.**

He knew everyone who worked for him as an individual. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their aspirations, their fears. He always took the criticism from outside the group, but let each of them take the praise for what they contributed.

**He was humble.**

I never understood why. With all he had done and had accomplished in his life, he was always modest. There was one time, about ten years ago, when he made a little boast. That one probably doesn't count though - he was stating a fact and we were both a little drunk.

**He had character.**

He was honest and truthful. He was dependable. When he gave you his word, you always knew you could count on it. He didn't cheat. He didn't try to find the easy way out of a tough situation. He didn't waffle on his principles. He was not inflexible, but there simply were limits that he wouldn't cross.

The best leader I ever knew died recently. He was my father. I will miss him.