

LEADING FROM VALUES

Alan D. Pesky

Fostering an organizational culture grounded in core values can generate success in surprising ways, far beyond one's original goals and vision. Such was my experience with the Lee Pesky Learning Center (LPLC), a nonprofit I founded nearly 25 years ago. Embarking on a venture in a field I knew little about was not something I expected to be doing at the age of 63, several years into my retirement. But then, I never expected to lose a child.

I had spent most of my life in pursuit of achievement and embraced many different leadership roles in business, philanthropy, and the military. Yet this was different from anything I'd ever done—not least, because I was doing it in the name of our son Lee, who died of brain cancer at the age of 30. Failure was not an option for me, because I didn't want to fail Lee. His death became a turning point that would lead me, improbably and remarkably, to the most meaningful and fulfilling work of my life: helping children with learning disabilities. And in helping others to learn, I found myself learning about the benefits of leading from values.

Why are we here? Let's do it together. Let's keep learning while we do it. The LPLC is where it is today largely because it adhered to these three foundational values. This, I'm convinced, is also why we continue to attract outstanding, committed, and passionate professionals who choose to stay and keep learning themselves. They don't come for prestige or to earn higher salaries. They are drawn by the spirit of what is possible and by the certainty that they will be empowered to help children fulfill their potential in life. While some of the details I will share here may be unique to our organization, I believe our experience has relevance for institutions beyond the field of education, and for leaders who seek to effect meaningful change in their communities.

Background

I'm fortunate to have experienced success in diverse arenas. I was one of the five founding partners of the advertising agency Scali, McCabe, Sloves, which we launched in 1967 out

of a hotel room in New York City. It rapidly grew to be a leading agency of the era and was acquired by Ogilvy & Mather 15 years later. I'm honored to have served as a trustee for my alma maters, Lafayette College and The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and I have served on the boards of many philanthropic organizations. For several years, I chaired the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews and, after Lee died, co-founded the Brain Tumor Foundation. When I wasn't working or spending time with my family, I focused my energy on sports, endurance athletics, and adventure travel. I rarely found the time to relax or read a book.

In the fall of 1995, Lee was diagnosed with a glioblastoma, and within 69 days, our beautiful, witty, vibrant son was gone. My relationship with Lee had been rocky. Complicated. He had learning disabilities at a time when there was little understanding of common issues like dyslexia and ADHD. It wasn't until the 1990s that brain science and legislation began to catch up with the needs of children who learned differently. Learning disabilities, as we now know, are a matter of processing, not a reflection of a child's motivation or intellectual capacity. They affect approximately one in five people with varying degrees of severity, regardless of socioeconomic or ethnic background. There is no cure.

Today, with the benefit of accurate diagnoses and professional remediation, people can learn strategies for overcoming obstacles to learning. But these advances came too late for Lee, and I probably didn't make things easier for him. All too often, I misunderstood his behavior and needs and had a hard time accepting his challenges.

After Lee died, my wife, Wendy, and I decided to keep our son's memory alive by creating something positive and enduring from our loss. I couldn't go back and repair my relationship with Lee, but I could do something to help other families. The field of learning disabilities had come a long way, yet there was still an alarming gap in the delivery of services to children, particularly in Idaho, where we lived. We established the LPLC in Boise in 1997 to help kids with learning differences in a way we weren't able to help our son.

We started small, with a staff of two in a modest space and offered two services: diagnostic evaluations and evidence-based remediation. LPLC grew organically from there as our expertise, client demand, and resources allowed. Within a year we were able to add counseling services for children and their parents. Soon, requests from teachers and schools started trickling in: Could we help them identify learning disabilities in students and improve K–3-grade reading instruction? We worked to do just that by creating professional development and in-school programs. Then the state legislature asked us to draft the early childhood education guidelines for Idaho. Eventually, research became an essential part of our mission, and before we knew it, LPLC had become a respected authority on early literacy programs.

Twenty-four years later, the Center has helped more than 100,000 children, has trained thousands of teachers to improve reading outcomes in their classrooms, and is recognized today as a research leader in the fields of learning disabilities and early literacy. Most importantly, we make a sustainable difference every day in the lives of individual children and their families.

It has been an unlikely success story, driven not by growth targets, timelines, or strategic plans, but by a deep commitment to values. Yet, it was only when I began work on my memoir, *More to Life than More*, that I had the opportunity to articulate the three core values that intuitively guided the organization. It was never our intention to be seen as the best, nor did we strive to be the biggest. Ego and professional vanity have no place when you are dealing with the lives of children. We simply wanted to *do our best* for each child who walked through the door. At every step, we said, "Why are we here? Let's do it together. Let's keep learning while we do it."

Why Are We Here?

The value that lies at the heart of the Center is both a question and a touchstone: *Why are we here?* We are here to help kids. This is more than a mission—it's our daily compass. We're guided by the belief that every

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child who walks through the door of LPLC is the most important child. Even the name of the organization reflects this focus on the child: “*Lee Pesky Learning Center*.” LPLC was created because of Lee, and it exists solely to serve children like him. Cristianne Lane has headed our professional development team for 15 years, and she always begins her sessions by sharing the story of Lee and how he struggled. When remediation specialists meet with a family or a child for the first time, they usually do the same—not because we’ve asked them to, but because they understand why they are here—to help *that* child, with empathy and science-based expertise.

Everything we do and how we do it has to be of benefit to the people we serve. If it doesn’t relate to our mission, we don’t do it. This applies even to simple things like office space. A plush office or an imposing building won’t enhance the quality of our evaluations or the efficacy of our remediation services. The Center must be easy for parents to get to, and it needs to be bright and welcoming.

Why are we here?

*Everyone has a unique
learning fingerprint.*

The backbone of LPLC’s child-centered mission is an approach that values the whole child and seeks to deliver measurable results. Everyone has a unique learning fingerprint—even people who don’t have learning disabilities. Rather than squeezing all students into a one-size-fits-all learning formula, we begin with science-based, well-tested models and then tailor them to the needs of each learner. Incoming reading levels are measured for all new students, and progress relative to the baseline is monitored. If a child isn’t making progress in the clinical setting or at school, it usually means we haven’t yet found the right approach for that learner, and the intervention plan needs to be adjusted.

Many variables contribute to an individual’s learning processes and challenges, and Center professionals from three different areas of expertise must work in close coordination to understand the whole child. The intervention plan designed to help a child overcome his or her particular obstacles to learning is formulated jointly by a psychologist, a remediation specialist, and a counselor. This mission-driven team approach, using evidence-based practices, delivers results for the kids: 90% of learners meet their academic goals. Moreover, constant communication and cooperation among staff members strengthens the expertise each can offer to the next child. There are no turf wars at LPLC. *Everyone* benefits from a collaborative and harmonious working environment.

Organizational takeaways: Is every employee/team member aware of our mission? How does each person articulate it, and how do they view their contribution to the mission? Do all of our practices, systems, and approaches directly support our mission?

Let's Do It Together

Collaboration has always served our child-centered philosophy. At the beginning, it was our only way forward. Many players have a hand in the education of our children, and when the balance is upset, students lose out. Before launching the Center, I was warned that an independent learning facility intersecting with the public-school system and its students could make waves. School districts would likely be reluctant to work with us, and administrators and teachers might view us with suspicion.

The first thing I did was to hire Blossom Turk, who had been the principal of one of the largest high schools in the state, as our Executive Director. As a highly respected insider of the public-school system, Blossom was able to build trust with teachers, school administrators, and parents—partners who would be critical to our ability to help children. Blossom and I worked as a team to formulate the plans for the Center. I see leadership as a form of partnership—a collaboration founded on the recognition that we all have different strengths and talents. I'm not an educator, so I left that part of the equation to Blossom. Between the two of us, we talked to parents of children with learning disabilities and consulted top specialists and researchers in the field. We met with state legislators and the Department of Education. We visited business leaders and university presidents. By the time we opened our doors, we had won the buy-in and active support of the key stakeholders.

Since then, I've been there every step of the way, supporting the staff with energy, passion, and vision—and the trust to let them do what they do best. One of the most valuable things I can do is to cultivate

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a welcoming, constructive environment in which everyone feels valued and empowered to share, discuss, and disagree. Whenever I visit LPLC, I try to spend time with as many team members as possible, giving each person my full attention.

The spirit of collaboration extends to our clients as well. The students who come to LPLC learn differently—they are not “broken.” Our job is to work *with* them and to get to know the person—not just the learner who is struggling. In this way, we can help the students identify and harness their strengths to find their individual paths to learning. It's not about us.

Collaboration with other institutions was a natural and necessary progression in our mission to serve children. The Center's *Special Education Collaborative* with Boise State University's College of Education has allowed the Center to leverage its resources and help narrow a shortfall in special education teachers in the state. LPLC partnered with Lafayette College and Yale University researchers to pioneer a new technology—a computer-based virtual maze—for early detection of dyslexia. And one of the nation's largest foundations is partnering with LPLC on a Pay-for-Success-modelled initiative to boost early childhood education in Idaho. Institutional partnerships such as these have enabled LPLC to do what it couldn't have done on its own: improve reading outcomes for as many children as possible—not just the ones who come to LPLC—and expand the use of evidence-based reading instruction throughout the country and even in other countries.

Organizational takeaways: How can we improve collaboration throughout our organization to optimize results for our clients/constituency and exceed our goals? Have we identified and reached out to all stakeholders, and what are we doing to strengthen these relationships? How can we better leverage our resources by collaborating with like-minded and complementary organizations?

Let's Keep Learning While We Do It

Anne Clohessy, who has been LPLC's Lead Evaluator for over 20 years, often kides me about how we began:

“Alan, we were building the plane while we were flying it!” It’s true, but it wasn’t as terrifying as it sounds. We had to be a “learning institution” right from the start—by which I mean, “an institution that learns.” For many years, we hosted an annual conference on learning disabilities, inviting experts, researchers, teachers, and special education professionals to participate. It wasn’t only a learning opportunity for our staff and board members; the conferences created a bridge between researchers and practitioners and helped get critical information into the hands of teachers and parents.

Evidence-based practice requires agility and a certain amount of humility. As data change, assumptions, and models must be adjusted, and Center professionals must be able to course-correct in their approaches with individual students. The culture of learning was already well in place by the time our current chief executive officer (CEO), Dr. Evelyn Johnson, joined LPLC. She spent time with each of the department leaders when she arrived to educate herself about how the parts operated and worked together. Evelyn’s background is in special education, not psychology, so she was hesitant to ask our clinical psychologist why her evaluations were aligned with old testing models that referenced intelligence scales. Anne, who had been with us virtually since the start, stared at Evelyn for a moment, then said, “Wow. I hadn’t thought about that.” She went back, reworked the evaluations, and hasn’t stopped adjusting and improving them since.

To keep an eye on continuous improvement, Evelyn instituted the videotaping of intervention sessions that are then viewed by the staff during training. The goal is to identify what’s working, and what can be improved. It can be difficult and humbling to watch yourself on videotape, let alone in a group of your peers. It is a testament to the culture of learning and collaboration that the staff engages in this training openly and with trust, knowing that it’s all about improving services for children.

Eric Kandel, the Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist, once remarked that we learned more about the brain in 10 years than we did in the previous centuries—a fact that is both exciting and daunting. Keeping up with new findings has always been a way of life for the

LPLC staff. It wasn’t until Evelyn joined us as CEO and Research Director that we realized the team had something valuable to contribute to the ever-growing body of knowledge they were drawing on. It began with the identification of a weakness: we were using solid, data-driven practices, but applying them inconsistently. Using an intervention plan successfully with an individual student is great. But we wanted to leverage that information systematically and scientifically for the benefit of all clients. Evelyn launched LPLC on a year-long effort to collate, analyze, and codify its methodology and clinical findings—in effect, scaling our business model. The results formed the basis of LPLC’s research efforts going forward and came to be known (for lack of a better name) as *The Pesky Way*. This effort has improved outcomes with clients and has made LPLC’s teaching models replicable for use by other institutions. The quest for improvement through research also allowed LPLC to augment its funding sources with research grants and reduced its reliance on individual contributions, ultimately enhancing the long-term viability of the organization.

Organizational takeaways: What systems do we have in place for capturing and analyzing information and trends essential to our mission and are they working for us? Are we adjusting our assumptions and practices based on new evidence and a changing landscape? How can we use “live” training to improve results for our clients/constituency?

Conclusion

LPLC offers an example of a values-based approach to a big idea, conceived on a modest scale. And it is by cleaving to its values that the Center has been able to make an impact far beyond its footprint. Its success is a testimony to the magnifier effect of collaboration, learning, and sharing. In a recent letter to LPLC’s staff and board, Dr. Johnson wrote, “We may be a small learning center in Boise, Idaho, but as the saying goes, we are so much greater than the sum of our parts.”

The Center has never veered from its goal of trying to make the world a better place, one child at a time. Solid operating plans, disciplined budgeting, and active fundraising helped keep us afloat. But institutional

preservation was never our goal. Our mission is to do our best in helping kids. When I was young, I didn't associate success with humility. Today, I couldn't be prouder that our core values at LPLC are grounded in the recognition that our mission is not about us, that we can't get there on our own, and that we always have more to learn.

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Alan D. Pesky is the founder of Lee Pesky Learning Center, a nonprofit organization working with families, schools, and communities to understand and overcome obstacles to learning. In 25 years, the Center has benefited over 100,000 children, trained thousands of teachers, and become a research leader in the fields of learning disabilities and early literacy. Alan was a founding partner of the advertising agency, Scali, McCabe, Sloves. He and his wife are ardent supporters of humanitarian causes and were honored in 2005 as Outstanding Philanthropists of the Year in Idaho. Alan has served as trustee for his alma maters, The Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and Lafayette College. His book, More to Life Than More, will be published in early 2021. To learn more, go to www.lplearningcenter.org.