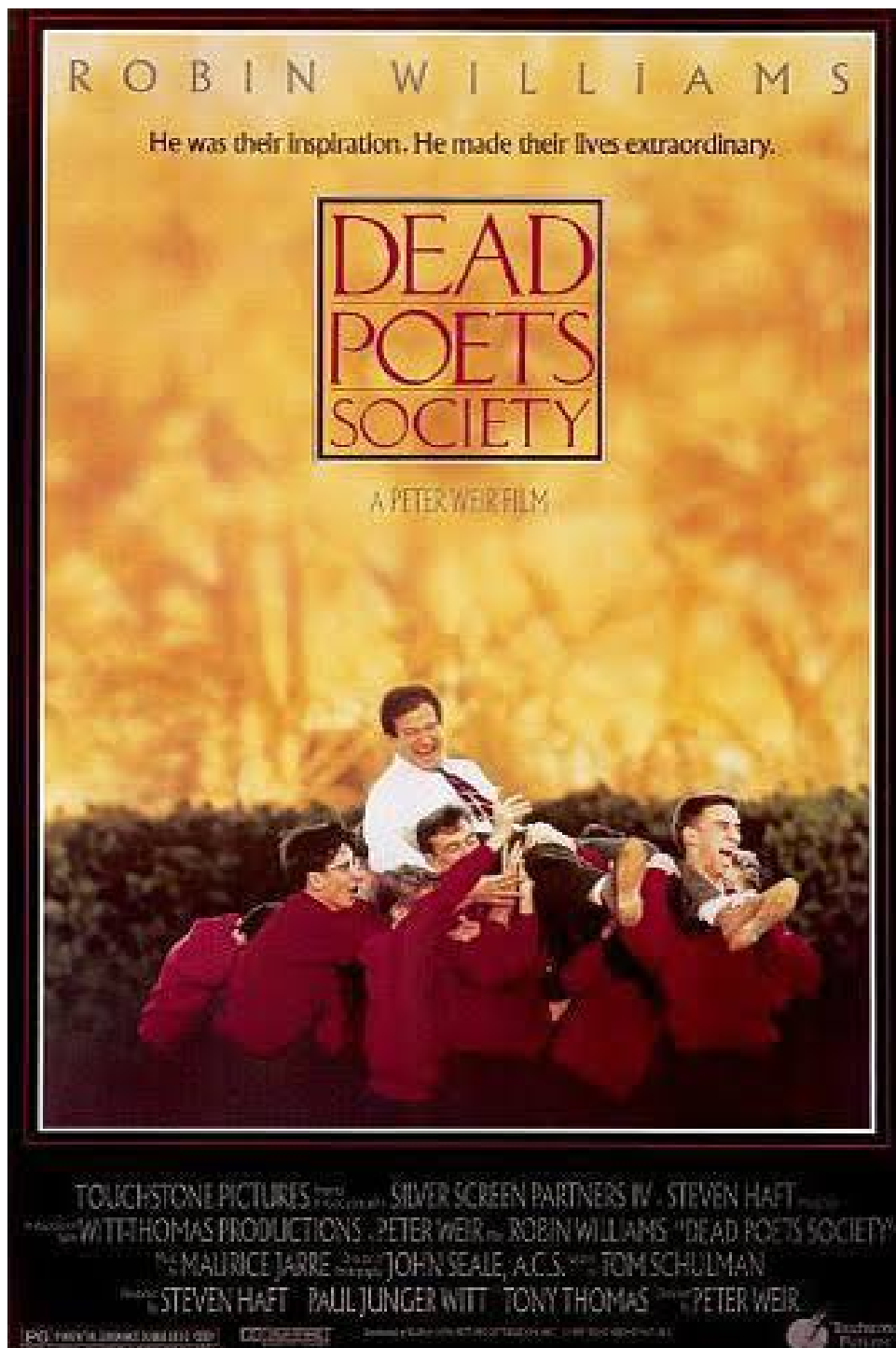


Authentic Transformational and Ethical Leadership in Dead Poets Society

By Starr Sackstein on July 17, 2018 5:12 AM



In one of my recent leadership classes, we were asked to watch a movie and consider the leadership style exhibited in the movie and what made it work which was aligned with the reading we were doing in class. I chose to write about the *Dead Poets Society*, a movie that to me, demonstrates the power of leadership for teachers in our profession. Each one of us in the classroom has the power to lead and inspire students tremendously.

For a leader to inspire real, lasting, transformational change, he or she must embody the things they hope their followers will become. In the *Dead Poet's Society*, John Keating is one of those leaders. As a new English teacher in the Welton Private School for boys, he breaks the mold of what learning can look like and inspires the boys in his

charge to make their experience of English and poetry powerful and meaningful. Each student in the class is impacted in a different way, but he wholeheartedly helps the boys who form their

secret society, after the one he formed earlier with his peers as a student there, to really love their learning time together.

Leaders are different people in schools and John Keating proves a powerful authentic transformational leader. He never takes his power for granted but never uses it to exert pressure on the students. Instead, he challenges them to think for themselves, often pushing them outside of the box and encourages them to take risks. Understanding the kind of students these boys are and the pressure put on them from their own outside forces, he eagerly does things differently and because he treats each boy with respect, they, in turn, do the same even though they don't get what he is doing at first.

John Keating is not just transformational, he is also an ethical leader as he aspires to a "higher form of leadership. In seeking to bolster the moral foundation for transformational leader, Bass and Steidlmeier noted that the **ethics of leadership rests upon three pillars**: (1) the moral character of the leader; (2) the ethical legitimacy of the values embedded in the leader's vision, articulation and program which followers either embrace or reject; and(3) the morality of the processes of social ethical choice and action that leaders and followers engage in and collectively pursue' (1999:182)." p. 115. Keating is a teacher who wants his students to be more than just vessels through which knowledge is stored. He wants to inspire and reach students deeply.

There is one situation that is potentially ethically challenged and that is the case of Neil Perry, a promising young man who is deeply invested in the class and his own passions for being a thespian. Unfortunately, his father is adamantly opposed to him seeking any extra-curricular learning that can compromise his expectations of Neil becoming a doctor. Neil opposes this future for himself but lacks the ability to stand up for himself to his father and other authoritarian figures. At the beginning of the school year, Neil is told to drop the annual despite clearly showing an aptitude as he was named editor. Dutifully, Neil does as he is told.

As the movie progresses, Neil is **encouraged and inspired by Mr. Keating**. He takes a risk to try out for a local theater production of a MidSummer's Night's Dream, knowing that his father would not approve. In fact, his roommate and friend warns him that this could be problematic. When Neil is cast in the lead role, he forges his father's signature. When his father comes to learn of his participation, he promptly arrives at the school telling Neil to quit. Neil goes to Mr. Keating for advice. Mr. Keating tells him he must talk to his father. He never tells him to go against his father. He merely implores him to share his passions with his father and let them speak for themselves. Neil says he can't but still promises to do it. He later lies to Mr. Keating about a fictional conversation he never had with his father, but the viewer could tell that Mr. Keating suspects that he may be lying.

Ultimately, Neil does perform and does a great job. His father shows up and promptly takes him home. Mr. Keating is admonished by the school and the parents and is ultimately forced to leave. Neil ends up taking his own life as he refuses to own the life his father wants for him. Despite this tragedy, Mr. Keating still has the loyal following of the students as Neil's choice was not his fault in any way and he remains the students' "captain."

Leaders in schools come in all shapes. The Headmaster of Welton is Mr. Nolan, a very traditional authoritarian who still believes in corporal punishment. He has no desire to challenge the status quo and has a disdain for anyone else who doesn't follow his rules. It is evident that although he is the leader of the school and has the ultimate authority in terms of what happens disciplinarily, he is not well-liked or followed, but rather feared or tolerated. Mr. Keating is set up as a contrast to his power and the viewer can see real change in the students who follow him. Regardless of the fact that Mr. Keating is let go after Neil's unfortunate death, the students will remember him forever. That is real transformational leadership as each boy is profoundly different because of his leadership.