

What I Learned in Elementary School, As an Adult

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On May 2, 2010 the town where I live, Kingston Springs, Tennessee, was ravaged by a flood of biblical proportions. In addition to the many homes substantially damaged or destroyed, Kingston Springs Elementary School was wiped out. Once the initial clean up was complete, all we had left was little more than the brick shell of the building. Questions were being raised as to whether reconstruction could take place in time for school in the fall and, if not, where to hold classes in the mean time.

Help came from a totally unexpected source; NBC. It turns out that the network was developing a spin-off of Extreme Makeover Home Edition, called School Pride, and it pretty much did the same thing as the other show, but for schools.

When the producers of the show arrived a few weeks later, they informed us that the intent was to use local volunteers to completely rebuild the school in 7 days; a pretty ambitious goal if you ask me. Let's make a long story short, the work began on July 22 at 8 AM and was completed at about 10:00 AM July 27. Do the math. We had our unveiling ceremony before noon that day (no "bus driver move that bus", but still pretty exciting).

I learned a few things about management and leadership by being a part of the volunteer team. Imagine 600 or so volunteers (some skilled – most not) thrown together in a major construction project with only a hand full of designated leaders. Then give them a huge project with a tight deadline and you will either have incredible success or a complete breakdown. Fortunately, we reaped the former and here are a few of the reasons why:

- **A well-defined goal** in which EVERYONE was mentally, physically and emotionally committed. We all knew the objective and took ownership before showing up for work.
- **Recognizing individual strengths** and allowing people to take the lead on the skills they had developed. For example, those that knew framing and carpentry lead the teams of volunteers in those areas. I was recognized for being particularly adept at fetching things for others; hammers, screwdrivers, parts, coffee, etc.
- **No Egos!** People pulled together to accomplish a task and no one cared about who got credit.
- **Celebrating each other's accomplishments** at the end of each day. Before leaving the site at the end of the shift, most of us walked around to see what other teams had been doing and then complimented each other on the progress.
- **Major celebration at the end!** We actually caught the folks at NBC off guard that morning when over 600 people showed up to walk through the school and see the finished product (they had expected about 200).

In short, this large group of volunteers outperformed most teams of people who are being paid a salary and showered with benefits. This goes to prove a point that I strongly believe. That is, that people do not perform well based on compensation; they perform well when challenged with a clear, understandable goal and their physical, psychological and emotional desires are stimulated. If you want to take your staff to the next level, find ways to implement the bullet points listed above on a daily basis. You will be amazed at what happens.