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The Way of the Shepherd

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THE INTERVIEW

In my lowly role as cub reporter, I had just returned from covering my third ribbon-cutting ceremony of the week. That's when I found the pink *While You Were Out* slip, with Christina Nickel's name on it. This book is the result of her unexpected call to the *Texas Star's* newsroom.

Hungry to impress my editor, I had called Christina three weeks earlier, requesting an interview with the reclusive Theodore McBride, the most respected business leader in America. He had led General Technologies to seventeen years of unprecedented success during his ongoing reign as CEO.

Bracing myself for a letdown, I dialed Christina's number. She got right to the point. "Mr. Pentak," she said, "Mr. McBride asked me to return your call."

"Yes," I said, holding my breath.

"He's agreed to do the interview."

I was stunned.

On the day of the interview, I arrived a little early at General Technologies' world headquarters so I could get the lay of the land. Two things immediately struck me. First, I couldn't

help but notice the dynamic atmosphere. You could sense the energy that employees radiated as they scurried throughout the building. Second, General Technologies obviously worked hard at making its employees feel valued. From the lobby and health club to the credit union and employee food court, even on the flat-screen monitors in the elevators, appeared the words “General Technologies: Our People Are Our Greatest Competitive Advantage.”

I need to come work here, I caught myself thinking on my trip to the fortieth floor. *Must be nice to work in a place where you don't feel like a cog in a wheel.*

Moments later I found myself standing in the anteroom of Theodore McBride's office, talking to Christina Nickel. “Hello, Mr. Pentak,” she said. “Mr. McBride is expecting you. He's wrapping up an overseas conference call and will be available shortly.”

“No problem,” I said, taking the opportunity to probe. “Tell me, how long have you worked for Mr. McBride?”

She turned and smiled. “Fourteen years,” she answered.

“I take it you must like working for him to stay so long.”

“Mr. McBride is the best person I've ever worked for,” she declared.

“Why's that?” I asked.

At that moment she noticed that McBride's extension light had gone off on her phone console. “He's ready. Right this way.” While reaching for McBride's door, she answered my question. “He expects the best from us, and we give it to him because we know he's giving his best to us in return.”

The door swung open, and I found myself face-to-face with the legendary Theodore McBride, looking for all the world like someone's grandfather. He surprised me by speaking first.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Pentak," he said, firmly clasping my hand in both of his. "I'm Ted McBride." Suddenly I felt like I was nine years old and back in short pants. *I can't believe I'm this nervous*, I thought.

After several minutes of small talk, however, the Old Man had me completely at ease. He had an engaging personality and listened intently to everything I said. Finally, I asked the question that had kept me up nearly the entire night.

"Tell me," I said, "I've been dying to know—"

"Why I chose you to do the interview?" he interrupted.

"Yes," I nodded, "and why now?"

"Because you're green and inexperienced and haven't yet been tainted with arrogance. In terms of why now, at the moment you don't need to know. You just need to know that I have my reasons."

He noted the puckered expression on my face and continued. "Look, don't take that personally. I get a hundred requests a year to do what we're going to do here today. All of them come from seasoned business broadcast and media journalists who already 'know' all the answers. They get on the nightly news and pontificate with absolute certainty about what the market is going to do and why. The only problem is, one will say with absolute certainty that the market is going to go up, while another will say with equal assurance that it's going down. These are the same people who have reported on my company for years.

“One time, one of your more sensational competitors wrote, after I had cashed in a sizeable portion of my stock options, that I had insider information that our company was about to experience a severe decline in earnings. He accused me of cashing out ahead of the public and suggested that I should be investigated by the SEC. Everyone else picked it up because it was ‘news.’ The only problem was the decline in earnings never came; I had cashed out to pay for my daughter’s wedding, nothing more. I chose you, Mr. Pentak, because you don’t write that way. There’s an honesty about your writing. What’s more, you’re still young and idealistic enough to be teachable. I’m not going to hand over the seven greatest management principles to anyone who already has all the answers.”

“The seven greatest management principles?” I mumbled, wondering if the interview was about to turn into something more than I had planned.

“Yes. It’s no surprise General Technologies has been the number one company to work for in America for much of the last decade. There’s a spirit of teamwork here that isn’t found in most companies. That didn’t happen by accident.”

“It happened because of the seven principles?” I asked.

“Absolutely. The best part is you don’t have to be a company of fifty thousand to see them work. They’ll work in any setting, for anyone who knows and acts upon them. It doesn’t matter if you’re a sales manager for a pharmaceutical giant, a manager of a small fast-food franchise, or the director of a Sunday school department. It doesn’t matter, because people are

the same wherever you go. You just have to know what the principles are and follow them.”

“How did you come up with them?” I inquired.

“I didn’t,” he replied flatly. He rose from his chair and walked over to the window. “They were handed down to me. They were given to me by the greatest man, outside of my father, that I ever knew. He handed them down to me when I wasn’t much older than you are.” He peered out the window, pausing just long enough for effect, then added, “Now . . . I’m going to hand them down to you.”

I quickly put away my list of prepared questions and whipped out my blank notepad.

KNOW THE CONDITION --- OF YOUR FLOCK

I was an MBA student about to graduate from the University of Texas at Austin,” McBride continued. “The last semester all of us were exhilarated that we had actually survived the program. Our professors threw so much information at us so quickly, we used to joke it was like trying to take a sip from a fire hydrant. But despite feeling ecstatic, we also felt anxious to find work and therefore busied ourselves with recruitment interviews on the UT campus. Finally the day arrived that I had been dreaming of. I landed a position with General Technologies. I was thrilled to no end . . . and terrified.”

“What terrified you?” I asked.

“I was hired as a manager in the financial operations division, where I would supervise nine people.”

“So you worried you weren’t up to the job?”

“Yes and no. I wasn’t afraid of working in the finance department; it was the idea of supervising nine people that scared me to death.” McBride turned as if to look at something far away. He shook his head slowly. “When I look back now,” he continued, “well . . . it makes me laugh. I was a cocky MBA

with all the answers, but I didn't have a clue where to start when it came to managing people."

"So what did you do?" I probed.

"I went to see one of my professors, Dr. Jack Neumann. He had taught one of our courses in the MBA program. He was also my mentor. The day I landed the General Technologies job I couldn't wait to tell him the good news. I also wanted to ask for his help."

"And he was the one who taught you the seven principles?"

"Exactly."

And so McBride sat down and began to tell a story that at times sounded more like fiction than fact. But according to him, what he learned from Dr. Neumann had unlocked more of the secrets about becoming a great leader than any other principle or program he'd ever encountered. I sat rapt, ready to hear the secrets revealed as McBride took me back forty-five years, to April 12, 1957.

April 12, 1957

When I landed the position at General Technologies, I sailed down Austin's Speedway Avenue to the School of Business, ran up three escalators, and flew into Dr. Neumann's office.

"Dr. Neumann, I got the job! Can you believe it? General Technologies hired me!"

"That's great! Congratulations, Ted," he said, putting his hand on my arm. "GT is a great company. I'm proud of you. I knew you could do it. What are you going to be doing for the company?"

"I'm going to be a manager in the finance department!" I declared.

"That's great!" Neumann replied. "All those late-night hours you spent studying finance really paid off. You'll be a wonderful asset to the company and a great representative of our program. I know you'll do well."

"Thanks, I certainly hope so," I said, dropping my head. "I've spent so much energy trying to get my degree and get through interviews that I hadn't given much thought as to whether I'm actually up for the job."

Dr. Neumann silently eyed me from across his desk. "Okay, Ted, what's wrong? Are you afraid you can't do the job? You shouldn't be; with few exceptions, you made straight A's."

"Well, Dr. Neumann, it's not that. It's not the finance part that scares me," I stammered. I was embarrassed to look so weak in front of someone I admired so much.

"Well, what is it, then?"

"It's the management part. I'm going to be supervising nine people. I've never supervised one person before, and now I'm going to be supervising *nine*. Dr. Neumann, I have to be honest with you. I'm scared to death at the prospect. I don't even know where to begin." I fumbled with my hands for a few moments, then finally looked up and blurted out, "Can you help me?"

Almost immediately an awkward silence filled the room. I felt like I had just let down my mentor. Jack Neumann taught in one of the best MBA programs in the country. *I can't believe I just did that*, I thought. *He doesn't have a lot of spare time on*

his hands, especially for students who already occupy nine-tenths of his every waking hour.

Dr. Neumann sat in silence, staring a hole through me as if he were weighing an idea. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he spoke.

“Ted, I’ve never known a student, including you, who didn’t have spring fever this close to the end of the program. It’s difficult enough for students not to mentally check out of here, especially after they land a job. I’m also aware that you have big assignments due in your strategy and finance classes and a final exam in B-Law that comprises 100 percent of your grade. I can teach you the secrets of managing people, but you’ll have to keep up your course load *and* give me your Saturdays from here to graduation.”

Now it was my turn to stare back at him. He was right. I *did* have spring fever. I counted MBA School as one of the greatest experiences of my life, but all I wanted now was *out*. Neumann interrupted my thoughts.

“Ted, I don’t mind giving you my Saturdays, but I won’t do it if you don’t have a teachable spirit. The opportunity cost of my time is too high. Think it over and call me tonight to let me know what you decide.”

That evening I went home and mulled it over. *Surely, GT would train me*, I thought. Then again, Neumann was no mere college professor with his nose stuck in a textbook. He was voted Outstanding Professor of the Year a half-dozen times, partly because he had real-world experience. In fact, he still had a thriving consulting practice.

I didn't have to think long. "I must be insane," I said out loud as I dialed Dr. Neumann's number. But before I could change my mind and hang up, he answered the phone.

"Hello," he said.

"Dr. Neumann . . ."

"Yes, Ted. What did you decide?"

"I've decided to do it."

"Good," he said. "Be at the Business School on the corner of Speedway and Inner Campus Drive at 8:00 A.M. tomorrow. I'll swing by and pick you up. Oh, and wear a pair of jeans you don't mind getting dirty."

I hung up the phone, my mind buzzing with questions. *What had I gotten myself into? Jeans?*

Despite my reservations, at eight the next morning I stood on the corner, wondering if I wasn't the dumbest MBA on campus. I already had my job, after all.

A moment later, an old, beat-up pickup with fading paint pulled around the corner and stopped in front of me. The passenger door flew open and, to my astonishment, there sat Dr. Neumann, dressed in a T-shirt, faded jeans, and a pair of worn-out cowboy boots. I had never seen him wear anything but a coat and tie. Before I knew it, we were squeaking and bouncing our way to Neumann's ranch home in the Texas hill country. Pulling off the farm-to-market road, we wound our way up the long driveway to his ranch. The size and beauty of the ranch struck me. *Maybe I should get into consulting*, I thought.

Halfway to the ranch house, he turned onto a side road. About a half mile down on the right, I saw a large, picturesque

pond, bordered on one side by a row of old oak trees. Their giant limbs fanned out, throwing shade over the meadow behind them. There, in the shadow of the trees, lay a small flock of sheep. Dr. Neumann pulled the truck off the side of the road and killed the engine.

“Here we are,” he said, turning with a grin. “I need to check out my sheep.”

I stared out the window. “Really?”

“Yes. I always check my flock first thing in the morning. I usually check them before now, but I thought you might want to watch.”

You've got to be kidding, I thought. “Sounds great,” I said. I turned my head so he couldn't see me roll my eyes. I was putting in terribly long study hours. Had I known about this little detour, I would have been more than happy to get an extra few minutes of sleep, while he checked his sheep out on his own. Still, I figured it wouldn't take long. We would get to the management lesson soon enough.

“Who would have thought,” I said as I reached for the door handle, “one of the top business school professors and consultants in the country tends sheep!”

Neumann laughed as he got out of the truck. “Don't give my secret away! Besides, I love these sheep. They bring back great memories for me.”

“They do?” I asked.

“I grew up in Wyoming, where my dad operated a large sheep ranch,” he explained. “I used to work summers, tending sheep as a ranch hand. It was a great learning experience.”

Despite my regret over losing precious Saturday morning sleep, a powerful sense of curiosity began to sweep over me. As Neumann walked to the gate, I saw every sheep in the flock get to its feet and amble over to meet him—large, well-fed sheep. When he joined them in the pasture, the sheep started bleating.

“They look excited to see you,” I said.

“The feeling’s mutual,” he replied. “They either see me or my ranch hand at least twice a day. They’ll follow me all over this pasture.” He reached down to pet one of the sheep. “Come on in. They won’t bite, if you’re nice.”

“Oh-kaaaay,” I said as I entered the pen. Some of the sheep momentarily stepped back. Then, as if they felt reassured that I was safe, they surrounded me as they did Neumann.

“Man, these sheep stink,” I said out loud.

Neumann laughed. “Ted, that’s a tiptoe through the tulips for me. What did you expect, a new-car smell? Help me out here. How many sheep do you count?”

I did a quick canvass and answered, “I think, forty-two. It’s difficult to tell with them moving about.”

“Good,” Neumann said. “That’s what I count, and that’s how many are supposed to be in here.”

“Great,” I replied. “Well, I suppose that about wraps it up?”

“Not quite. We’re not done yet.”

Dr. Neumann began to check out every sheep in his pasture, looking over every one from head to hoof. When he started checking their skin to make sure they had no worms, scabs, or any sign of disease, I was glad I had skipped breakfast.

Next he checked their hooves to make sure they weren't split or infected. "They look pretty good," he said. "It won't get too difficult for them for another month or so."

"Summer heat gets to them?" I asked.

"Well, that and the flies," Neumann replied.

"The flies?" I didn't know if I wanted to hear what was next.

"Yes, they come out during the summer. Deerflies, horseflies, ticks, flees, gnats, and mosquitoes. The worst are the nasal flies."

"Nasal flies?"

"They fly up a sheep's nose and lay eggs in the nasal membranes," Neumann explained. "From there, the flies crawl up the sinuses and into the sheep's head, where they make their home. The irritation drives the sheep crazy. Come summer, we'll have to dip each sheep in bug spray to protect them."

"Glad I asked," I said, certain I was about to lose my lunch before I even ate breakfast. "Are we ready now, Dr. Neumann?"

"Almost. I need to take a quick look at the fence line and the pond. It won't take long."

Over the next fifteen minutes I watched Dr. Neumann check the pond to make sure the water was drinkable and inspect most of the perimeter of his fence line. Along the way, he stopped to use the heel of his boot to fill in a hole that some animal had dug under the fence. He also checked out the pasture to make sure no poisonous plants had sprung up. Finally, he said, "Let's head up to the ranch house. I'll cook us a late breakfast."

Fifty-five minutes later, after a hearty breakfast and two cups of strong coffee, we cleared off the table. Wiping off the still-warm black skillet, Neumann looked at me and asked, “Are you ready?”

“I sure am,” I replied. “Let’s get down to business.”

“Great! Come on and I’ll drop you off back at school.”

I felt stunned. “What!” I protested. “What do you mean ‘back at school’? I thought I gave up my Saturday to learn how to lead people. All we’ve done is traipse around a bunch of smelly sheep! When are we going to get to the first lesson?”

Neumann calmly eyed his skillet without looking up. “We already have—and they’re *not* a bunch of smelly sheep.”

“What do you mean, ‘We already have’?” I insisted. “Am I missing something here?”

Neumann put down the skillet, walked over to the other side of the table, and sat down. “You’ve already had your first lesson in managing people,” he said evenly, “and, yes, you missed it. But I’m not surprised; many managers do.”

The lump of frustration in my throat grew even larger as I seesawed between feeling like I had just wasted my time to feeling like I had just missed what I came to learn. “When did I receive this lesson?” I asked meekly. “Out in the pasture?”

“Exactly.”

I gave Dr. Neumann a blank stare.

“Look,” he said. “When you start work at General Technologies, you’re going to begin with a flock of nine people. To be a successful leader, you’re going to have to interact with them in much the same way that a shepherd interacts with

his sheep. Ted, your financial skills are great, and you need that to get started, but to really succeed, it's going to take more than that, much more. GT isn't going to promote you into an area where you'll oversee more people until you do well with the nine you already have. So if you want to learn to be a great leader, you're going to have to learn the Way of the Shepherd."

"The Way of the Shepherd?" I asked timidly.

"Yes," Neumann said. "I told you earlier that I grew up working on my dad's sheep ranch. I also told you that I learned a great deal out on the Wyoming grasslands."

"Yes, I remember. Go on."

"What you don't know is that I couldn't wait to leave my dad's ranch and get to where the action was. I wanted to go to the big city and make my way in the world of commerce. You remember the first day of class when I told all of you how I had come out of the corporate world?"

"Yes."

"Well, I had a very successful career there. Like you, I started out at an entry-level managerial post. By the time I left, however, I was executive vice president of the company."

"Okay."

"When I started out, I quickly realized that during all of those years when I thought I was wasting myself on a bunch of sheep, out in the backlands of nowhere, I was in fact learning how to lead people. More importantly, I was learning how to lead them in a way that made them want to follow."

"C'mon, Dr. Neumann," I objected. "Are you *serious*?"

Neumann looked me straight in the eye. “I’m dead serious, Ted. I learned how to shepherd *people*. If you want to be successful, you’re going to have to learn how to shepherd people too.”

“The Way of the Shepherd?” I repeated.

“Yes. Once you learn the seven principles of the Way of the Shepherd, you will be a very skilled leader indeed.”

“So what’s the first principle?” I asked.

“You mean the one you just missed?”

“Very funny. What am I supposed to do, check my people for ticks? Please, Dr. Neumann, you’re going to have to help me out a little here. You know I’m not exactly used to getting up at the crack of dawn on Saturday.”

A sly smile spread over Neumann’s face. He rose from the table and walked into the kitchen. Before I had time to protest, he returned with another pot of coffee, filled our cups to the brim, and told me to get out my notebook. He sat down, took a long sip from his coffee, and stared intently at me from across the table. Finally he put his cup down, leaned forward, and in a low voice said, “Ted, the first principle of the Way of the Shepherd is to *always know the condition of your flock!*”

I started taking notes.

“A manager can’t manage what he doesn’t know,” he continued. “So you have to make a point of knowing not just the status of the work but also the status of your people. Many managers focus too much on their projects and not enough on their people. They do what you did when we walked the

flock this morning. They're there with their flock—but not really. They're preoccupied with the work and not with the workers.”

“Well, the work has to be done,” I observed.

“Yes, it does. But remember, it's your *people* who get the job done. Your people are your greatest competitive advantage. Managers will say they agree with that, but often they merely give lip service to the idea.”

“I know what you mean,” I broke in. “I used to have a boss who talked a good game but never followed through. Whenever anything went wrong, he would pound us into the ground and then turn around and expect us to do our best work for him. Then when things went well, he never paid us a bit of attention. It was a miserable experience.”

“Ted,” Neumann continued, “that's exactly why the first principle of the Way of the Shepherd is to know the condition of your flock.”

“How do I do that?” I asked.

“First, remember that when we checked out the flock this morning, we did it one sheep at a time. The nine people who will report to you at General Technologies may be part of the same flock, but they're individuals, and that's exactly how they'll want to be treated. Believe me, people are tired of being treated like a number. Each person who reports to you will want you to treat him or her not just as an employee but as an individual.”

“That sounds good,” I said, “but how, specifically, do you do that?”

“You have to take a personal interest in each of the people who report directly to you,” Neumann answered. “You need to discover their skills and interests. You need to know their goals and dreams, what motivates them when they walk through the door in the morning, what their career ambitions and frustrations are. In other words, Ted, you have to make a point of knowing what things are impacting them at the moment.”

“And how am I supposed to learn *that*?” I asked.

“By engaging your people on a regular basis,” Neumann replied. “I told you earlier that either I or my ranch hand circulate among the flock at least twice a day. When you get to General Technologies, you’re going to have to do the same thing. You’re going to have to get out and get among your people. When you do, keep your eyes and ears open and ask lots of questions. Most importantly, follow through. If an employee requests time to take his child to the doctor, for example, the next time you see him, ask how the child is doing. As best you can, keep up with what’s going on in the lives of your people. That sounds easy to do, but it’s next to impossible if you don’t do the last thing.”

“And what’s the last thing?” I asked.

“You have to really care about your people. You can go through all the right mechanics, but if you don’t genuinely care about the people who report to you, you’ll never be the kind of leader they’ll drop everything to follow. If they’re nothing but stinking sheep to you, they’ll never do their best work for you and they won’t stay in your fold for long. It’s an

THE WAY OF THE SHEPHERD

old adage, but it's true: people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

"Anyway," Neumann concluded, "I've given you enough to think about for today. You need to get back to your other schoolwork. Let's head back to campus."

It was a quiet ride back to the university. Dr. Neumann *had* given me a lot to think about. I cracked open my notebook and looked at the notes I had written:



THE WAY OF THE SHEPHERD

1. Know the Condition of Your Flock

- Follow the status of your people as well as the status of the work.
- Get to know your flock, one sheep at a time.
- Engage your people on a regular basis.
- Keep your eyes and ears open, question, and follow through.

Before I knew it, Dr. Neumann had dropped me off in front of the Business School. As I watched him drive away, I couldn't help but think I was about to get more than I had ever bargained for.