Liked For The Right Reasons

Earning the long-term thumbs up in the age of hyperliking

"**Curious children ask "why"**—especially after adults set limits. "Why can't I stay up later?" "Why do I have to eat my vegetables?" "Why do I have to brush my teeth?" These are daily queries in most households with children. At camp, I'll hear: "Why do I have to swim with a buddy?" "Why can't I call home?" "Why do I have to put on a raincoat?"

The temptation for any adult—whether the biological or surrogate caregiver—is to acquiesce, to give in. What could be the harm in staying up late, eating candy, and going to bed without brushing one's teeth? One would be a more popular parent. How about swimming alone, calling home, and getting soaked in the rain? One would be a more popular camp leader—at least temporarily.

Think it's OK to bend the rules for the sake of popularity? Not only is that poor leadership-by-example, it's also when accidents happen. Decrease your camp's liability and develop your character this summer by leading with integrity.

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Certainly, giving in creates instant popularity. As Bill Watterson, beloved creator of the *Calvin & Hobbes* cartoons, reminds us, popularity rankings count. But as many times as precocious and spritely Calvin tries to manipulate his father with reports of dipping poll numbers, his dad never gives in to Calvin's absurd requests. (Calvin, of course, is more likely to act first and beg forgiveness later. That's a topic for a different article.) Meaningful leadership—including parenting—requires a heart that is both warm and steadfast.

The trouble is we live in a world of real-time rating. We can't watch a televised political debate these days without seeing an EKG-like graph wiggle along the bottom of the screen. The fluctuations actually reflect viewers' current favorability ratings for the candidates. As fascinating as the first impressions of younger, Internet-age viewers may be, this real-time rating begs the question: Do we really want to know what people think about complex policy issues before people have had time to digest and reflect? Neurons transmit signals, on average, at a whopping 3,560 meters per second. Heck, sometimes we react literally without thinking. But our post-cogitation opinions often differ from our first impressions. That's why it's called a "knee-jerk reaction" and why the aphorism "I need to sleep on it" is apt. Meaningful leadership also involves reflection.

Enter the "like." On Facebook, it's a thumbs up; on Twitter and Instagram it's a heart; etc. Given the inaccuracy of first impressions, such real-time ratings are obviously perilous.

Devastated By Silence

Last year, I met with a student who had self-referred to the school health center after experiencing a panic attack. (Given that the lifetime prevalence for panic disorder is about 5 percent, this was not an unusual referral. Given the stress of boarding school, this was actually a fairly common one.) What was unusual was the precipitant of this 16-year-old's wave of anxiety: She had received only two likes in 24 hours after posting of a photo of her new puppy. And she was imploding as a result.

The "like" is a precarious metric about which most social media aficionados have lost perspective, a perspective this young student desperately needed. Believing that her friends did not like her new pet and that her poll numbers were dipping, she assumed the worst: She had become unloved and even unworthy of others' affection. Rest assured the absurdity of this conclusion takes nothing away from the real emotional sting she was feeling that day. It took some time, but I was able to reshape her view of the precious "like."

Photo: Christopher Thurber

If a social media post doesn't get the attention you were hoping for, don't take it to heart. Sometimes people are just too busy to notice.

I've been on Facebook since the early days. (Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder, was a student at Phillips Exeter Academy when I started my job there. I had an early and inherent interest in likes.) My most liked post in 10 years is a photo of a stack of pancakes. The second most liked post on my timeline is a photo of the hospital where my father was recovering from a heart attack. The first example shows the inexplicable combination of Facebook algorithms that highlight trivia in people's news feeds, along with the equally inexplicable nature of people's senses of humor. The second example shows the fungible nature of online likes. They can mean anything from "cute" to "tragic."

Moreover, the absence of a like doesn't mean anything. At least, no reliable conclusion can be drawn from the absence of a like, except that people you thought might take the time to click a thumbs up did not.

They may have been driving, sleeping, peeing, working, eating, studying, shopping, or doing any one of a million things people do when they are not online. There's also an outside chance they were online, but didn't see your post. Or maybe they saw it and didn't like it. Or maybe they saw it and liked it, but were distracted by a pop-up or a banner ad or a text or any one of a million other online interruptions.

It is illogical to conclude that anyone who didn't like my pancake shot disliked pancakes (or me as a person). It is equally absurd to conclude that people who didn't "like" my dad's heart attack post didn't feel sorry for him. And don't get me started on the number of comments that noted, "Chris, I liked this post as a show of support for your father, not because I liked the fact that he had a heart attack." Naturally. But there were as many of those comments as there were comments that expressed

sympathy and went on to explain that it felt inappropriate to like the post. Paradoxically, I could then "like" their statement about not liking. Absurd indeed.

A Little Perspective

Do you have some perspective? Here's a little more: Humans want to be noticed, validated, and loved. That's the truth of being a social animal. Also true is that we are often too busy to notice what's going on with our friends and acquaintances. Social media makes that noticing easier because the virtual world has no special barriers. I can notice something my friend in Australia did one second ago just as quickly online as I can notice what my own child did one second ago in my kitchen, where I'm currently sitting. Heck, if you turn on push notifications on your mobile device, the machinations of your friends around the world will actually

interrupt what you're trying to notice about your own child. (That's in an article I've already written. Plus, most people have the good sense to tame their devices and rein in their intrusive power. However, if one more person's phone rings in the middle of my next conference presentation, I might have to bonk him or her on the head with it. But I digress.)

So, there is an online world that operates in parallel to our off-line world. That's fascinating. And it hasn't just doubled the number of people, places, and things we can notice; it's increased them 1,000-fold. The kicker is that our attentional capacities have not expanded, nor have we added hours to the day. We may be slightly better at multitasking than a generation ago, and we may be sleeping less and working more (all conclusions supported by research), but there are still 24 hours to the day, and there are still limits to what we can focus on. This wacky world demands we make more trade-offs than ever about how we spend our time. Sadly, if our hordes of friends don't overwhelmingly like something we find enchanting or hilarious, we over-personalize their lack of likes, retweets, favorites, and smiling emojis. 😊

This circumstance leaves youth leaders in the challenging position of enforcing rules with, and wanting to be liked by, young participants who relish the instantaneous and put more stock in popularity than did previous generations. Indeed, youth leaders themselves may possess these same vulnerabilities, having grown up with social media. The dual challenge of having those leaders choose the hard right over the easy wrong—and perhaps experience a popularity drop—with campers who have little practice integrating reflection into their judgements is enormous.

Four Principles To Consider

Today's youth leaders need to use a robust set of strategies to overcome the dual challenge of maintaining integrity with kids who instantly evaluate everything. Here's a start:

1 **Decide what you stand for.** At the core of integrity is a set of beliefs about what's important in life. Good health. Kindness. Generosity. Honesty. Perseverance. Courage. Openness. Forgiveness. Creativity. Appreciation of beauty. You decide. But decide before you start your job, because those beliefs are the bedrock of your leadership and at the heart of every interaction you have with children this summer.

2 **Commit to what you stand for.** Integrity means not caving when it's convenient. Or when you think it would make you popular with the kids. There will be plenty of times this summer when you'll be called upon to enforce a camp rule or policy and you'll think, "Rules were made to be broken" or "I'll make an exception just this once." Not only is that poor leadership-by-example, it's also when accidents happen. Decrease your camp's liability and develop your character this summer by leading with integrity.

3 **Embrace your relationships.** The bonds you form with colleagues and campers require a long-term investment horizon. You won't form lasting friendships by being expedient. View important relationships as commitments to the other person's development, not transactions. Although setting limits may make you temporarily unpopular, campers will quickly learn to see you as a reliable, safe, and loving person who has their best interests in mind.

4 **Stick up for others.** Once you are on solid footing, you'll be called upon to defend the less-skilled, less-admired, and less-confident. Online, there is a tendency to judge and pile on without knowing many of the facts. Off-line, you are in a better position to listen to others, provide empathy, and give encouragement to those you care for. Not only does this stop bullying and harassment, but it shapes a culture of caring at camp that gives people the courage to take healthy risks and connect with others.

In action, these four principles may sound like this:

"Hey, that's enough."
"Guys, that's probably not the best idea."
"I wish we could, but it's not safe."
"I don't think she likes that."
"You're right. That will take some time."
"Your hard work is starting to pay off."
"What else do you think might work?"
"I see that you're putting in some serious effort."
"Imagine if that were not against the rules. What would happen?"
"That's what I call a creative solution."
"Since we can't do that, what other options do we have?"
"No. But there are some other fun choices to consider."
"What's the most important thing to think about here?"
"This is an unpopular decision, but I think it's best for camp."
"It's good to see you following the rules, even though it's a hassle."

When more children attend camps where staff members have integrity and lead by example, there will be fewer campers who will grow up to be devastated by silence on social media. And the more we lead without respecting instantaneous popularity, the better the outcomes will be for ourselves and our charges. Remember, apps should be fun, but the phone should not be the garden where you grow self-esteem. Leave that to camps.

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