

ACQUIRING YOUR VOICE

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This essay examines how I acquired my voice; one meant to promote social, legislative, and practical changes in the effort to assist working families. Mostly, this essay is a self-reflective account of my life, with emphasis placed on my family upbringing, working career, educational background, mentorship, age, and experience, as well as other pertinent activities that helped me develop the voice I now have to promote change.

Ten years ago, I was counting the days to retirement at General Motors. If I had been asked then to write a description of the ideal job for the next phase of my career, it wouldn't have been better than my current position at the Workforce Development Institute (WDI). So how did I get here? At 60 years old, recognizing that I'm nearing the end of my working career, I now have the credibility, experience, and appropriate platforms to use my voice. When reading my story, I want you, the reader, to ask yourself: How did you get there? What life and career events shaped your belief systems and enabled you to acquire your voice to promote social change?

Family Upbringing

I was brought up in a middle-class family that placed a very high emphasis on working hard and never missing a day of work. At a recent family function, my 73-year-old brother mentioned that he hadn't taken a sick day in 52 years with the same company. I

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don't remember my mother or father ever taking a day off because of illness. If you had a job, you had an obligation to go to work, regardless of how you felt. My parents didn't have a lot of extra money, and from an early age I was always encouraged to make my own. I had lawn and snow-shoveling customers at age 12; I had a morning paper route from ages 12 to 18; I worked multiple afternoon and weekend jobs during my high school years. "Anything to make a buck" was the phrase my family used when describing me. Those jobs developed the work ethic I maintain today. Yet they also limited my participation in school activities, including sports, clubs, and other things that make for a full and well-rounded educational experience. Even though I attended a private Catholic high school that emphasized attending college after graduation, I was one of a small handful who decided to immediately start a career. That decision was okay with my family, as they placed little value on attending college. I'm the only member of my family who ended up attending, and graduating from, college, albeit as an adult student. My wife's family, on the other hand, placed a high value on attending college. My wife and four of her five siblings attended, and graduated with professional degrees.

Working Career

I started working at a stone quarry immediately after graduating high school. Over my seven years there, I was promoted a number of times to better-paying positions and given additional responsibilities. I received those promotions solely through my hard work and commitment to the company. I started to realize that the credibility I had as a worker also brought with it more opportunity to give my opinion about operations. I found I had a meaningful voice that most people listened to.

In one case, though, it took the intervention of a third party to have my voice heard. It was 1973, and the recently formed OSHA was going to inspect the quarry for the first time. I drove a quarry truck at the time. These trucks were huge and hauled rocks and boulders from one section of the quarry to a primary crusher that

ground up the rocks into smaller sizes. On a typical day, 40 trips were made to the crusher, each with 35 tons of rock in the bed of the truck, down a very steep road inside the quarry. Since starting to drive the truck the year prior, I had told the company mechanics that the brakes would not stop me when going down the hill fully loaded. They dismissed my concern by saying that when they drove years ago, their trucks didn't stop either, and that I should feel lucky, because those trucks didn't even have doors or workable heaters. The OSHA inspector chose to ride with me, and the first time down the hill, he asked me to stop the truck. I tried, and it wouldn't stop; it didn't even slow down much. He asked me to try pulling up the emergency brake, which I did, and the truck kept going. After I dumped that load of stone in the crusher, the inspector asked me to get out of the truck. He asked me what I would have done if a pickup truck or car had been stopped in front of me on the hill. I replied that I would probably have driven over it. He then called the garage; a mechanic came down and drove the truck up the hill. That afternoon, I was allowed to drive the truck again. The brakes worked. In fact, they worked every day after as well. To this day, I don't believe there was any malicious intent on the part of the mechanics having me and others drive trucks with faulty brakes; rather, it was just the way it had always been. What I learned was that having one's voice heard sometimes needs the assistance of a third party who either has more credibility; or in this case, sanctioning authority.

After leaving the stone quarry, I took a job at General Motors, where I started working on the assembly line. I quickly discovered that seniority was a key element to a worker's advancement, GM being a union shop, in contrast to the non-union stone quarry. That never swayed my work ethic and commitment. I was there every day, giving my 100%, regardless of the job. My hard work was recognized by the union leadership, who asked me to run for union office after being there only a few years. I never aspired to be a union representative; in fact, my family all worked non-union jobs, and the few times that unions were brought up around the dinner table, the discussion was usually negative; addressing a strike or how much

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union workers got paid. I accepted the new role totally unaware of what I was getting myself into. I felt awkward at first wearing a union-representative shirt, but it soon became apparent that the shirt gave me the responsibility of not only expressing my own voice, but also expressing the voice of the union leadership, as well as the voices of the members whom I now represented. The shirt was but a symbol, however; my credibility as an effective voice had to be earned from others, including union leadership, members, and management, through hard work, integrity, fairness, visibility, and genuine interest in and concern for others' issues. I'm proud that I never lost any of my five elections.

One phrase I never wanted to hear from any of the members I represented was "the only time I seem to see you is during election time." The reason I never heard that term is because I made it a daily practice to see and interact with all of the 250 members I represented. By doing so, I demonstrated that I cared about their issues and concerns. The daily interaction also enabled me to be a more effective voice, and to better represent their concerns. It was challenging, seeing everyone daily, but one of the fruits of that labor was an unblemished election record.

Other union roles I eventually had gave me the opportunity to challenge myself to grow as a person, become a leader, and, ultimately, acquire a respected voice with the entire union membership and leadership, as well as the company leadership. Those roles also gave me the opportunity to work with community and educational groups outside the plant to develop programs to assist the membership. It was slightly uncomfortable at first meeting with community and educational leaders, but I discovered they were interested in what I had to say. I possessed something they did not have: the practical experience and knowledge of the workforce. My voice became a critical ingredient in the development of numerous programs that were eventually offered to our workers. Two of those programs were the Paid Educational Leave (PEL), where union members attended college full-time, and the Technical Educational Preparation (TEP), where members attended college-prep classes 40 hours a week in order to

acquire the skills needed to enter the PEL program the following semester. Both programs were designed so that members could focus on their education, while simultaneously receiving 100% of company pay and benefits. The design and implementation of both programs involved countless meetings with secondary education and college administrators who were very accustomed to operating programs in prescribed manners, such as semester start and end dates, the amount of credits needed to be classified as a full-time student, and the amount of hours their teachers could work. Each item was an issue, but not one was insurmountable. Through dialogue and compromise, the needs of the school and union-member student were both taken into account and the programs were created.

The development of both programs enabled me to establish relationships with educational providers and community leaders that I still have today. Many of those long standing relationships are still very important to have with activities I'm currently engaged with as the Director of Field Services for the Workforce Development Institute. Two other by-products came from the development and implementation of those programs. First, it gave me the incentive to pursue my own college education through night school. Second, it enabled me to positively change people's lives.

Educational Background

Never ashamed for not choosing to attend college upon completion of high school, I did gradually find that the lack of a college degree limited my career options. Laid off from GM for just over a year in the early 1980s, it was almost impossible to find another quality job, solely based on being a hard worker, with only a high school diploma. When I was recalled to GM based on my seniority, I immediately worked as much overtime as possible to save up for the next time I'd be laid off. I felt like a gerbil in a spinning wheel; preparing for the inevitable, but not really changing my situation. The opportunity to develop the college and pre-college programs for the union members altered my focus to include my own education as a means to eventually break the cycle of either being laid off or

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working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Using the night-school approach and starting with one course a semester, I eventually increased my workload, taking two and sometimes three courses per semester. I knew it would be a long road, but I enjoyed the learning, the challenge, and having something in common with the other union members who were taking college classes in programs I oversaw. Another by-product of being in night school for 14 years was the genuine support and encouragement from the same college staff, educational providers, and community leaders I had been working with to design programs or meeting with during other community boards or functions. At every meeting or event, at least one person would ask how school was going, and offer their encouragement that I continue and finish. Those words of encouragement helped keep my morale high and my desire to succeed intact.

My ultimate educational goal was to earn an MBA. To follow that path, I received an AS in Business Administration, and was deciding what two courses to take to finish up my BS degree in Business, Management, and Economics. One of the final courses I decided to take was in Adult Education. That course, coupled with my interaction with adult learners, totally changed my direction. Instead of attaining a business degree, I focused on eventually attaining my MS in Adult Education. I found that this was an area I was truly passionate about, and it also provided me with a number of future opportunities to exercise a strong and knowledgeable voice to assist others.

Changing People's Lives

Acquiring a credible voice puts one in a situation to assist others make positive changes to their lives. I really cannot imagine anything more rewarding and humbling than being part of improving another's situation. Through my working career, two instances stand out: one was unexpected and instantaneous, while the other happened over a period of time.

The first occurred with a union member whom I represented for years. He was around my age; a very vocal, boisterous, and intimidating guy. Always in and out of trouble at the workplace. I had

many occasions of representing him during disciplinary procedures. As the college PEL and pre-college TEP educational programs were recruiting students, I encouraged him a few times to give one of them a try. His response was always the same: “What do I need college for; I have a job?” After the third or fourth time I discussed the program with him, he finally confided that he was scared that he didn’t have the ability to go to school and be successful. With my encouragement, he decided to give it a try, and enrolled. About a year later, he and his son were participating in the same adult/junior bowling league as my son and me. He came over and said he wanted to introduce me to his parents, who were watching us bowl. “Mom and Dad, I’d like to introduce you to the guy who changed my life.” That introduction happened almost 30 years ago. I can still remember the tone of his voice, the grateful look on his parents’ faces, and the humbling feelings I experienced. My knees actually buckled slightly. That introduction truly reinforced the fact that I could make a difference.

The second situation happened as a result of a program I was asked to develop and teach immediately after retiring from General Motors. The Director of Adult Education for the Rochester City School District had heard I was going to be retiring and invited me to lunch. He asked if I would be interested in developing and teaching a training program to city residents, predominately single mothers who were receiving various social benefits. The focus of the program was to give them the skills and behaviors to get and maintain a job. I accepted the job and developed the three-week behavioral training program. I discovered on the first day of the program that I had never worked with students whose economic situation was totally different than mine. A way to illustrate that contrast: If my car breaks down, I’d either get it fixed or buy another car. My students, on the other hand, didn’t have cars, and if they lost their bus passes, their lives were put into a tailspin. During my 18 months teaching that program, dozens of students would come into my classroom with huge smiles to report they had found a job. They were genuinely thankful for the instruction I had delivered and support I’d given. Those groups of ladies worked the hardest to succeed, and of all the groups I’d worked

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with, they were the most grateful for my assistance. Those students gave me an awareness of the problems faced by those who lack basic resources and, in many instances, a sustainable support system. On a personal note, that opportunity helped me become a stronger voice and advocate for individuals in different socioeconomic situations.

Mentors

I think we've all had people in our lives whom we've considered mentors. It could be a father, working with his child in the workshop; a mother, teaching her child how to cook; or a neighbor, teaching a child how to play baseball. During my working career, I knew many individuals whom I considered mentors. None of them ever overtly took me under their wing; rather, they conducted themselves in a certain fashion that I learned from and wanted to emulate.

The first was the president of the Local union (UAW) I worked for at General Motors. He used to say it only took two things to be an effective leader: "Surround yourself with good and talented people; then utilize them." He was never one to solely accept the accolades and praises of a successful contract, program, or event; he always acknowledged the hard work of those who were behind the scenes, putting things together and making them work. He saw something in me early on and gave me the opportunity to become involved, grow, and acquire a voice representing the interests of the membership. When he was eventually promoted to the international union, his leadership philosophy was followed by his successor.

The second of the people I consider mentors was a gentleman who worked for the New York State Education Department. He is probably the smartest and most confident person I have ever worked with. He had the ability to pull together various pieces, align them, and, ultimately, structure a workable program. It seemed that, regardless of how nebulous his ideas seemed at first, he had the ability to bring those ideas to fruition. He taught me how to take complex issues and boil them down into workable solutions. He always took the time to explain to me the flexibility and nuances needed to have multiple agencies buy in and work together.

In addition, he introduced me to many of the people and agencies that I still work with. His job duties of representing a large geographical region were very similar to those of WDI regional directors. In fact, the current job description of a WDI regional director can be traced back to him. When I started with the WDI, the vision of having a statewide presence was in its infancy. The original model of brick and mortar training centers was morphing into something new. The previous relationship I had with him gave me the confidence to offer a new model to WDI leadership. That model was accepted, and different regional director duties and expectations were implemented.

Age and Experience

While this may not be a requirement in every situation, I believe that age and experience were two building blocks that assisted me in acquiring my voice. Age has brought with it countless relationships made over the years. In many cases, those relationships assisted in forming alliances and coalitions that produced a powerful collective voice. My experience adds to my credibility. When meeting with a company, I mention the fact that I worked in a factory for 30 years. When meeting with a union, I mention that I was a union representative for 28 years. When meeting with a political leader, I mention that I was chairperson of a political action committee. By mentioning selected segments of my background, I can quickly establish that I have practical knowledge of the topic being discussed. Usually, conversations about mutual acquaintances or experiences follow. These, as well as describing my background, help me establish credibility, mutual understanding, and, hopefully, a rapport. Once established, it is much easier to have my voice heard and my ideas seriously considered.

I have found that my voice has been taken more seriously later in my career. I believe my age and past experiences, along with the confidence of having practical knowledge of the subject being discussed, helps me establish credibility. Without credibility, one's voice is viewed as mere noise in the background, and not taken seriously. In order to enact change, one's voice needs to be taken seriously and respected.

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Conclusion

Acquiring one's voice may occur through a set of circumstances, through a natural progression of one's life, or through a focused, systematic, laid-out plan. I would suggest that it occurs through a combination of these. With my own story, would I have accepted running for union office to become a third-party voice if the OSHA inspector had not decided to drive with me that day in the stone quarry? Would I have the same work ethic if I had been born into a different family? Would my career have progressed without watching and emulating people I viewed as mentors? Would I appreciate and value my education as much if I had attended college immediately after high school? Would I have continued 14 long years of college night school without the support and encouragement of my wife and others? Would I be as able to promote social and economic justice for others without the 18 months I spent teaching single mothers? Would I have accepted a job offer to work for the WDI if I didn't have my collection of life experiences? Some outcomes were planned. Some outcomes were happenstance. Collectively, all are factors in making me who I am today.

As I mentioned in the beginning, this essay has been a mostly self-reflective account of my working career. It is an exercise that I had never thought of doing. It has helped reinforce who I am, what I believe, and the difference I have made. It has also given me focus and the confidence to continue making a difference. Self-reflection is not an activity most of us take the time to engage in; we focus on today, tomorrow, and the future. I suggest that everybody take the time to look back at their careers and examine the events and situations that created the opportunities they found to use their voice. Having the credibility, experience, and platform to use your voice is the culmination of many factors in your career. It is something that should be appreciated and celebrated. Regardless of how finding your voice was achieved, you ultimately decide if and how it will be used. Having that voice is only the first part; you must also be willing to use it.