

2.1 CASE STUDY

An Emerging Leader

Tim T. portrays his life as a tension between “nature” and “nurture.” He sees it this way: He has two sets of DNA, and these two very different sets of characteristics have given him what he needs to be a leader. The first set of DNA, he says, comprises those “God-given genetic talents” that came from the biological parents who abandoned him at birth. The second set comes from the religious and caring family who adopted him two years later.

Tim’s nature is to be out in front of people and relating to them. These innate abilities of his have always been very public and people oriented: from his easy and eloquent speaking style and teaching skills to singing and acting. “As a baby, I was always an extrovert, and since age 2 or 3, people have told me that I would be either president of the United States, a preacher, or a comedian,” he says. “I didn’t intentionally work on these abilities; I have just always had them.”

His “other strand of DNA” came from his adoptive family whom he describes as gentle, unassuming, and quiet. Tim admits he ran in the “middle of the crowd,” while his family members were often silent bystanders standing off in a corner. They did, however, instill in him the strong values of “loving God, loving family, working hard, and giving back” that he embraces today.

Those two sets of characteristics allowed Tim to thrive early. Just out of high school, he was

given an opportunity by baseball player Derek Jeter’s Turn 2 Foundation to create a new after-school program for second to fifth graders called Proud to Be Me. The goal of the pilot program was to build children’s self-esteem and self-concept by providing them with new and diverse experiences. Tim developed it with the goal of giving these children a larger lens of what the world could be, so they would be empowered to see more choices than what they found in their neighborhoods.

“My core belief and approach has been to help others by giving them things that nobody can take away,” he says.

When Tim went to college, he supported himself working part-time at a bank doing collections, calling people on the phone to try to convince them to make payments on their debts. It wasn’t fun, but Tim excelled at it. “I would use my powers of persuasion to get people to make payments, not because it was my job, but because I wanted to help them. These weren’t bad people; they just got in over their heads.”

It was in this job that Tim realized his talents only worked if there was a purpose. “I tried to sell vacuum cleaners once and couldn’t even sell one to my own mama,” he says. “Do you know why? Because there was no purpose in it. But yet, I could talk these people who are struggling and hurting into making a payment. That’s when I knew that I can’t walk on the

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face of this earth and not help somebody. My persuasion has to have a purpose."

After finishing college, Tim went on to get a master's degree in communication and, at the age of 28, became the executive director of the Douglass Community Association, a 90-year-old private, nonprofit, inner-city agency that provides opportunities for youth development, education, healthy living, and leadership. Tim managed the center's \$1.2 million budget and 24 people. He spent much of his time out in the larger community raising money and resources and putting out fires. Although Tim enjoyed his role as executive director, he admits he had difficulty handling the day-to-day personnel issues at the agency.

"I spent a lot of time managing external human resources, but not paying attention to the needs of internal human resources at the center. When my staff did an assessment of me, they consistently said, 'He does a great job as a leader, but he is our boss and we need him here.'"

To enhance his skills, he took advanced leadership training at the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina and Harvard

University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tim left the community center after four years to become an associate vice president at Southwest Michigan First, a regional agency focused on catalyzing job creation and economic growth in an area that has been hard hit by job losses. For Tim, it's an opportunity that makes the most of his double set of DNA.

"This is the place where my talent and my passions meet. I can help people. I can sift through problems and take big issues and break them down in ways people understand. I can persuade and motivate people and organizations to grow," he says. "And I am still helping others in ways that people can't take away."

But Tim still wants to find more ways to help others by creating an independent foundation to help people and kids in need. "My experience has been that it is hard to help hurting people because there is so much bureaucracy and BS tied up in how we do it. I want to help people without strings. If you give people money to help them, don't give it to them if you need it back. If you're gonna do something for someone, just do it."

QUESTIONS

1. What is your reaction to Tim's story?
2. Nature and nurture play a significant role in Tim's leadership journey. From your perspective, which has the greatest impact on Tim? Discuss your answer.
3. Of the six major traits described in the chapter (i.e., intelligence, confidence, charisma, determination, sociability, and integrity), which traits are Tim's strongest, and which traits are his weakest?
4. What characteristics of Tim's leadership would you like to incorporate into your own style of leadership?