

# *Choose to Be a Leader*

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**B**YU is a wonderful place because it has wonderful students. I hope you all realize how much potential you have. You are all future leaders. You will lead in the Church, you will lead in businesses, you will lead in communities, you will lead in volunteer efforts, and, most important, you will lead in your families. One of the things I hope you learn here is how to be better leaders. If you do, you will be an enormous force for good.

I would like to share with you some things I have learned about leadership over the years, things I wish I had known about leadership when I was your age. I begin with a personal experience—one that provides several lessons about leadership.

From the time we were first married, Kevin and I have gone to visit my parents at their cabin in the mountains about seventy-five miles south of Provo. A number of years ago, while we were preparing to come home after one of those visits, my then young son needed to get something out of our locked car, so I gave him the keys and told him to be careful to not lock the keys in the car.

A few minutes later he returned, looking a little sheepish. He then hesitantly, but bravely, confessed that he had locked the keys in the car. What ensued was one of those moments that my children still refer to many years later: “Do you remember what mom did when the keys were locked in the car?”

Yes, upon hearing the brave confession of my young son, I responded in a way that corresponded more to his age than to mine. I threw a tantrum. I raised my voice, and I even kicked the car tire. I let my emotions take over. Fortunately that lasted only a few moments. My father calmly reminded me that I had roadside assistance insurance for times like this. His calm reminder instantly calmed me. I called roadside assistance, and we were soon on our way home.

Now you might wonder what lessons could possibly come from an experience like that. Let me suggest four.

## **Learn from Your Mistakes**

First, I learned that we can learn from our mistakes. I immediately regretted the way I had behaved that day. I reflected on the fact that, as a mother, I was a leader and a teacher to my children. And I resolved to do better. That experience had a powerful impact on me. While I am not perfect, I think I am doing better in that regard. Fortunately, as Elder Bruce C. Hafen once observed, “Because of the Atonement, we can learn from our experiences without being condemned by them” (“The Temple and the Natural

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*Peggy S. Worthen, wife of BYU president Kevin J Worthen, delivered this devotional address on 6 September 2016.*

Order of Marriage,” *Ensign*, September 2015). That is a powerful lesson for leaders to learn.

### Learn from the Examples of Others

Second, I learned that we can learn from the good example of others. My father’s calm reaction to my outburst quickly and powerfully reminded me how I should act in those situations. Although I already knew how I should act, seeing his example provided me with a distinct reminder that has guided me throughout the rest of my life.

It is also important to note that such examples don’t always come from those who are more experienced.

I went to BYU as a nontraditional student—returning to school after our youngest child began elementary school—so I was often the oldest student in the class. A few years after I had returned, I attended a class in which there were only a handful of students. Toward the end of the semester I had become well acquainted with the other students.

One day before class began, I was visiting with a classmate who was seated in the aisle next to me. While we were visiting, a young man—who also attended the class—walked into the room and started to yell at my classmate. The young man was obviously very angry. I didn’t know what had happened between them. However, I was shocked that this was happening at all. I wasn’t sure what to do. I even wondered if I should go get security.

While I was surprised at the original confrontation, what happened next was even more surprising. My classmate, whom I had been talking to, stood up to face the young man. I thought, “Oh no, a fight.”

Just then my classmate quietly and calmly said, “I am sorry that I have upset you. What can I do to make this right?”

I remember sitting back in my seat thinking that that response was probably one of the most mature things I had ever witnessed. The young man suddenly stopped—as if all the wind had just been knocked out of him. They both sat down in their seats. The two of them began to have a very

calm discussion, and that was the end of what could have been a very explosive situation.

My classmate had totally defused the situation with a quick, quiet, and calm response. Not only did he remain calm, but he responded with the “soft answer” that Proverbs teaches us will turn “away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1). What a powerful example.

### Choose Your Response

Third, as I thought about that experience and contrasted it with my own less-than-ideal response to my son having locked the keys in the car, I realized another important lesson for leaders. The lesson is that in every situation—even those that are packed with high emotion—we all have our agency to choose how to act.

Someone observed that “between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response” (unknown author quoted by Stephen R. Covey, *Living the 7 Habits: Stories of Courage and Inspiration* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999], 21; see foreword by Covey in Alex Pattakos, *Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl’s Principles for Discovering Meaning in Life and Work*, 2nd ed., rev. [San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010], vi). In other words, there is always a space, or an instant, in which we decide whether we will put out the fire or ignite the fuse.

Elder L. Tom Perry once taught this lesson by telling the story of a young missionary on his first day in Brazil:

*He and his senior companion were assigned to open a new city some distance from the mission headquarters. As they arrived in this new city and walked down the street, they passed a church with a minister standing at the front door. As they walked by the church, the minister went in and called to his whole congregation to follow him out into the street. There they followed the missionaries and started calling them names; then they became more violent and started to throw rocks at them.*

*The young elder was excited about this experience—his first day in the mission field and already he was*

*being stoned, he thought. Then, a big rock suddenly hit him squarely in the middle of the back, and his feeling changed to anger. Before entering the mission field he had been quite a baseball pitcher; and in the flush of anger he wheeled around, grabbed the first rock he could find on the ground, reared back in his famous pitching pose, and [was] just ready to let the rock fly at the crowd when suddenly he realized why he was there. He had not been sent all the way to Brazil to throw rocks at people; he was there to teach them the gospel. But what was he to do with the rock in his hand? If he dropped it to the ground, they would think it a sign of weakness and probably continue to throw rocks at them. Yet he could not throw it at the crowd. Then he saw a telephone post some distance away. That was the way to save face! He reared back and let the rock fly directly at the telephone post, hitting it squarely in the middle.*

*The people in the crowd took a couple of steps back. They suddenly realized that that rock probably could have hit any one of them right between the eyes. Their mood changed; instead of throwing rocks at the missionaries, they began to throw them at the telephone post. After this incident, every time the elder went down that street he was challenged to a rock-throwing contest. The rock-throwing contests led to discussions of the gospel, which led to conversions, which led to the establishment of a branch of the Church in that community. [L. Tom Perry, "Prophecies, Visions, and Dreams," BYU fireside address, 7 January 1979]*

No matter how high our emotions or how acute the crisis, there is always a space in which we can choose how to act. And in that choice, great leaders are made.

### **Set a Peaceful Tone**

Fourth, I learned from my experience that how a leader acts in those important moments sets the tone for those around them. My father's calm response immediately calmed me down, just as my young student friend's remarkably tranquil response calmed down his fellow student. On the other hand, my less-than-calm response served merely to upset my children.

Mosiah 20 provides us an example of how two different leaders set the tone for those within their stewardship with two different responses during a crisis. When the daughters of the Lamanites were captured by the priests of King Noah, the king of the Lamanites assumed that the people of King Limhi were the captors. Based on this assumption, the king of the Lamanites with his armies attacked the people of King Limhi without first verifying what had really happened to their daughters.

During the attack, the Lamanite king was wounded and left for dead by the Lamanites. The people of King Limhi brought the wounded Lamanite king before King Limhi and demanded that the king of the Lamanites should be slain. Instead of giving into the demands of his people, King Limhi told them not to slay the Lamanite king. Instead, King Limhi simply asked the Lamanite king why the Lamanites had waged war against them.

The king of the Lamanites replied, "Because thy people did carry away the daughters of my people; therefore, in my anger I did cause my people to come up to war against thy people" (Mosiah 20:15). Through this conversation the two nations were able to reconcile—albeit temporarily—and end the war.

It was in anger that the king of the Lamanites had attacked the people of King Limhi, choosing to ignite the flame. His choice to do so cost the lives of many of his followers and others. By contrast, King Limhi's choice to put out the fire returned peace to the land and to the souls of those he led.

I am grateful for all the wonderful examples of leadership I have in my life. It is my hope that as you obtain your formal education here at BYU, you too will strive to learn from your mistakes and from the examples of others and as future leaders choose to set a peaceful tone for those around you—especially in times of crisis. As you do so, I am confident that you will obtain those qualities that will help you to be true leaders and become an enormous force for good. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.