

Inspiration Isn't a Pep Talk (Or: How I Learned to Stop Losing)

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Bill Silber is something of a legend at the NYU Stern School of Business. He is so good at his job that when Stern students go for interviews at investment banks, the interviewer will ask if they took Professor Silber's introduction to finance. If they did, it's an indication that the student is going to know their stuff.

Think about that for a second. That's quite a leap of faith on the part of the interviewer, isn't it? I mean, I've taken a lot of classes in my day, and my mere attendance at that class hardly meant that I came out of that class an expert in the subject.

The thing that makes Professor Silber such an extraordinary professor is that he is not merely motivating his students; he's inspiring them. And this isn't exactly Dead Poet's Society -- the guy is teaching how to price bonds.

Here's how he does it.

First, he's an excellent communicator. (I don't like when people say "gifted speaker." Great public speaking comes from practice.) He explains complex concepts with such logical simplicity that you actually feel smarter at the end of a class, as if you've worked it out yourself.

Second, he has an unrelenting demand for a student's attention. Attendance is taken each class. Each student is compelled to participate. Lateness is not tolerated; the doors are locked at the start of class. Teachers show they care in different ways. The best I've seen are those that decide each student is going to learn what they're teaching, come hell or high water.

Third, and perhaps most effectively, he asks students to join small study groups. What makes these study groups so unusual is that the student who is having the greatest difficulty with the concept is given the task of teaching that concept to the others.

It's this third element that makes Professor Silber special. He didn't pioneer the concept of teaching to become master (that was a fellow called Yogi BhaJan). But he recognizes that the thing that inspires students more than anything else is not just what they'll do with the knowledge; it's the confidence that they know it so well that they could actually take that teacher's place.

True inspiration is not being told you can succeed. It's being shown that you can.

Let me give one other example.

When I was in high school, I ran track. I was a sprinter. I attended an inner city school in Jersey City, in the worst school district in the country (literally -- it was taken over by the state it was so awful) and I was, as far as I could tell, the only pale, skinny white kid lining up on the starting blocks. I routinely got blown out of the water.

My coach had a tool that she used for her sprinters. It was a bungee cord, with harnesses attached to each end. One person would run as fast as they could with it, while the other (in the other harness) would follow more slowly, so that the lead runner had to work harder because he was pulling the other person along.

One afternoon, after finishing last (again!), my coach came to me with an idea. "You're not slow," she said. "You're actually pretty fast. But you have no confidence. You can't visualize winning."

She asked me to put on the harness. But instead of me going in front to train, I went in back. In the front harness, she put our team captain -- a massive fellow named Wesley who had thighs like Secretariat. She put me in the starting blocks, and told Wesley to take off at a full sprint. I was meant to stay behind until I couldn't resist the force anymore and had to take off running.

And boy, did I ever take off. I barely touched the ground. I shot right past Wesley.

My coach was waiting at the finish line. "That's what winning feels like," she said. "Remember that."

It wasn't just a visualization technique. It wasn't a pep talk. She had showed me what it felt like to run that fast.

I never beat Wesley again, of course. But I wasn't coming in last anymore, either.

Your Epic Year is about inspiring not just yourself, but others too. You want to inspire people? Show them what success looks like. Let them know what it feels like. No motivation, no matter how compelling, can compete with that.

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