



Know When to Break the Rules

By Steven L. Anderson, Ph.D., MBA

Many people that I coach are trying to make their dreams come true, but they run into road blocks in the form of rules that prevent them from actualizing these dreams. It's my opinion that leaders realize that rules are sometimes made to be broken and they know when to do that. In my opinion leaders know when to think outside the box and that's what makes them leaders.

There are obvious examples of leaders who engage in social change, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who broke the rules to show that the rules were unjust. That is great leadership because these types of leaders risk life and limb to make their point. But I am actually talking about leaders who are deeply passionate about making their dreams come true and they are not going to let some silly rules stop them.

Allow me to give you two examples from a book I am reading entitled *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell. When Bill Gates was in high school his high school bought a very small computer that was a terminal connected to the University of Washington's mainframe. Back then computer time was very expensive, so Gates and his buddies, being fascinated by the computer soon burned through all of the time their high school had bought for them. No more time, right? Wrong. Bill Gates was going to get time on that computer no matter what. So he called the university to see if there was any way he could use a terminal at the university even though he was not a student there. The university informed him that there was a terminal available from 3-6am every morning. So, without telling his parents, he would sneak out of his bedroom window, walk to the university and use the computer. His parents never found out he was not home. Many years later his mother heard this story and said, "No wonder it was so hard to get you out of bed in the morning!"

Another example is the story of Bill Joy. He went to the University of Michigan in the early 70's. At that time UM had one of the most powerful computers in the world and Bill was fascinated by it, but students were only allowed to use it one hour per day. So he and his buddies figured out how to bypass the password system so they could stay on as long as they wanted to. He said that he would spend 8 hours per day in the lab, often not even bothering to go to class. Since his days at Michigan Joy has become probably the most famous programmer in history. He wrote UNIX and JAVA. As you can see, we are all the beneficiaries of Bill Gates and Bill Joy knowing when to break the rules. Now, I want to say, that I am not advocating throwing out your conscience just to get ahead. That's unethical. I am talking about trying to make a dream come true, and realizing that the rule that stands in your way is arbitrary and should be broken. Sometimes it's better to ask for forgiveness instead of permission. That's how change happens. Leaders create change. Sometimes they have to break the rules to allow that to happen.