



The Fast Track Diverted

Why am I sitting on this train? If I had taken a flight, I'd already be there. Instead, I've got four more hours to sit here and fume about what I've gotten myself into.

I feel like I'm eight years old again. Dad says, "Why don't you ride down on the train, Son! It'll give you a chance to think." And so I just *do it*. Like I've got time to sit for hours, thinking. Like I actually enjoy trains.

The thing about trains is this: trains only show you what you're passing, not where you're headed. Whatever you can see out the window is already old news. Been there. Regularly, the track bends enough that you can catch a glimpse of the journey ahead, but as soon as the train straightens its aim for the goal, you're left sitting in the back just watching stuff go past. An hour into this trip and I'm way past bored.

Scratch that last sentence. I'm not bored. And, truthfully, being stuck on this train is not what I'm really troubled about. What upsets me is the fact that I don't know what's

Mike Wilson's Journal

waiting for me at the end of this track. And I'm afraid to find out. I'm deeply worried about Dad. I don't know how I'm going to pass so much time sitting here just with myself.

And more truth: I used to *like* trains. A lot. It's one of the memories I *do* have with Dad. One of the too-few memories. And that's what this is *really* about. Sitting here reminds me of so much that I've lost. So much!

There you have it, boss: a journal entry. I'd say I'm well on my way!

All right, Mike, enough time on the therapist's couch. Here's a thought: scratch it all out. I doubt Charlie wants to read the sorry ramblings of a lost son.

Please let my dad be okay!

Okay, new start. Official sounding.

Journal entry: "Background and Orientation."

Two months ago, Charlie gave me the assignment of building a new leadership development practice for our firm, working from our Boston headquarters. An MBA, ten years of management consulting assignments, experience with nearly fifty clients around the world—I had done it all with this in mind, the chance to take the lead. Thirty-eight years old. Heading the development of our firm's newest and most promising practice area. My life was right on track!

Our firm routinely gets involved with helping clients attack tough strategic problems, strengthen their operations, and improve profitability. Up until now, however, we have never directly focused our client services on building critical leadership capacity in organizations. As a firm, we have the access and reputation required to build a practice

The Fast Track Diverted

in the area, but I knew we did not have a good handle on the current best practices in leadership effectiveness. It became my mission to pull together a point of view on “leadership that really works,” as Charlie put the challenge to us.

So I buried myself and my crew—the colleagues who joined me—in the research available about leadership, including traits, models, value propositions. PowerPoint presentations were zigzagging back and forth between our offices like crazed bats. We interviewed some of the best CEOs in the country, scanned mountains of journal articles, met with professors and writers who studied leadership, and amassed our data. We felt like we were launching a major Himalayan expedition. It felt good!

In all our research, some threads emerged. And a few especially puzzling findings spurred us to go deeper.

A Boulder, Colorado-based “freelance professor” and rock climber, Jim Collins, along with his team, had found some unusually curious data. He observed that dramatic improvements in company performance were coming from leaders whose traits and practices broke the traditional leadership mold. This research described leaders who were personally humble (in some cases, almost shy) and totally devoted to the service of others but who were also fiercely and unwaveringly resolved to do whatever it took to improve organizational performance. Something was jarring about great results coming from a self-effacing style, but the data was compelling.

It occurs to me just now that it was this Collins research that got me thinking again about my own dad as a leader. All right, score a point for this long train trip. Back in

Mike Wilson's Journal

business school, I took a fair measure of ribbing about my famous father. He was featured in one of the school's management case studies about leadership, ethics, and decision making in business. Honestly, I didn't put much effort into that assignment. Dad was well known, admired by many, so loved. And he gave me, his son, so little of himself. It was a sore point. Still is.

I didn't fare very well on that particular assignment, and my classmates rode me big time. Not that I really cared; I figured back then that some of them were better suited to social work than business, anyway.

But reading Collins had caused me to reconsider all of this. What I've always heard about my dad's way of working sounds suspiciously like the profile of the effective leader Collins described. The thought had even crossed my mind that if I was going to launch a new leadership practice, then my old man might be helpful. Just a week ago I was thinking about Dad and wishing I could get past my hurt enough to reach out to him and run some of these ideas past him.

I should be more careful what I wish for. Mom called me on the same day I was having those thoughts.

"Hi, Son," Mom said. "I'm glad I caught you. Do you have a minute to talk?"

Her words were casual, but her voice had none of its normal breezy character. A feeling of alarm began to creep up the back of my neck. Of course I had a minute to talk!

"It's about your father," she continued more slowly. She cleared her throat. "I've been putting this conversation off for a while, Mike. He's not been feeling that great lately." Mom's voice cracked, and silence filled the line.

The Fast Track Diverted

“Oh, just hand me the phone, Margaret!” My father’s voice broke the silence with that tone of impatience I knew so well. He sounded all right to me.

“Look, Mike, things aren’t too good right now. I met with my doctor this morning and there’s a problem. The bottom line is that I’m going to have to cut back on some things. He wants me to get a little treatment. Rest up.”

I was stunned. My mouth opened, but nothing came out. I had no words.

“I need your help, Mike,” he continued, his voice suddenly sounding like a badly scratched record. “I’m involved in some leadership projects here, and they’re all at critical points.” Now it was Dad’s turn to clear his throat. “I thought you could step in for me for a while, maybe a couple weeks,” he finished weakly.

I wasn’t processing any of this. My father, the master of understatement where his own personal issues are concerned, was saying that he had a problem! He needed a little treatment!

“I’ve talked about this with your boss. He told me you’re launching the firm’s leadership practice, so this should benefit both of us.” Dad plowed on with his pitch like a runner determined to hit the finish line. “While you’re helping us out, the team here will teach you what we’ve learned about a unique approach to leadership. Charlie suggested you keep a journal on your investigations while you’re here, and I’ve got some friends who can help you develop it into something useful later.” I heard my father take a quick breath.

“Would you come and help me, Son? Please?”

Mike Wilson's Journal

And just like that, my leadership sabbatical began. I can't adequately express how strange it is that I made such an abrupt move. I was in the middle of everything I had always wanted, on the threshold of a future I had always dreamed of. And I didn't like my father's unsolicited intervention with my boss in the least. Back to my earlier comment about feeling eight years old.

And yet I didn't hesitate. The sound of Mom's voice. What my dad said. What I felt in my heart. It all just went "click."

The next day, I handed off assignments to my crew. I decided to leave my techno-gadgets at home, packing three blank notebooks and an anxious mind. At the last minute, on an impulse, I dug back through my graduate school files and grabbed the case study on my pop. I was going to see him, yet I still didn't really know who he was.

My executive assistant booked me a seat on Amtrak to Philly for the very next day. She looked at me suspiciously, like I'd lost my mind. Amtrak! I explained myself by repeating my dad's explanation: "It'll give me time to think." Her frown worsened—it was alien possession, not mere mental distress.

And here I am. I spent the first forty-five minutes of my trip reviewing Dad's case study and have been writing ever since. I'm beginning to suspect that this investigation may well be as much about him as his projects. I'm actually glad. It's time.

Some notes from my reading:

The son of a coal miner, my dad grew up in tough circumstances. Like many of his generation, he went to war

The Fast Track Diverted

when called. On Robert Wilson's twentieth birthday, a cease-fire was signed in Korea's Panmunjom, and he was shipped home. The GI Bill took him to Princeton, where, according to the case study, he ran track. That reminded me of my favorite photo of him. A boyish Robert Wilson is straining forward, chest first, breaking the tape 100 yards ahead of the field in a 100-yard race! So fiercely determined was he to win that he false-started, failed to hear the recall gun, and ran the entire race alone. He explained to me, "I always expect to win and never look back to see the other guys."

That's the dad I know.

But the case study drew another picture that didn't fit this first-at-all-costs photo. Starting his career as a pharmaceutical salesman and rising quickly to management, he distinguished himself as a team builder. He always credited the team with his success, the file declared, and appeared to be genuinely surprised whenever he received recognition or promotions.

This just doesn't square with what I thought I knew about him. Honestly, I never felt that he gave me credit for much of anything.

Robert Taylor Wilson was described in the article as unique. When he became CEO of the company twenty-two years later, he hardly ever stayed in his office (or at home, I might just add). He spent a lot of time in activities that looked more like teaching than managing. He practically turned his company's entire senior team into teachers.

As a leader, he was known for setting high goals and standards. He was death on what the article called "mistakes

Mike Wilson's Journal

of the heart,” poor ethical decisions like when managers shaded the truth, took credit when it belonged to others, or passed on unflattering remarks about their colleagues. Conversely, he was softer on other kinds of mistakes. He used honest missteps as teaching occasions. He encouraged risk taking, though he wasn't afraid to remove people for persistent underperformance. His top leadership team actually got smaller in his first few years, even as the company doubled in size and profitability.

He avoided taking credit when things were going well; indeed, he went to great pain to attribute success to others. At the corporate annual meeting, he always showcased others' accomplishments, not his own.

He called himself a “truth teller.” He was famous for plain talk, for going to great lengths to describe company performance accurately. This part, at least, I recognize. He also encouraged managers to honestly describe the reality of their unit's performance.

Reviewing all of this from my dad's corporate past, I am becoming very curious to see the leadership system he has helped build in Philly. Maybe more to the point, I think I'm ready to take a fresh look at my father, give us both another chance.

Robert Taylor Wilson. I know that he looks great on paper. I know he has hundreds of loyal friends. I know that people love working for him. I also know there are dimensions of this man that I've never encountered. And I think I'd like to.

While I'm chronicling things I know, here's one more. I know why I'm sitting on this train. My father said “please.”

The Fast Track Diverted

It wasn't "Get down here, Son!" Just "please." I don't remember ever hearing that before.

Okay, time to put the pen down and watch America go past my window. The ride might not be too bad, really. I'm noticing the track bending out ahead. I can see the engine now, but even so, I can't see where it's heading. I suppose that if I were seated with the conductor at the head of this train, I would still be unable to see what's around that bend.

I wonder where this journey will take me.