

CHAPTER 3

The Risk Factor

My microphone is wireless and hands-free. I hook it on my hip and snap the lapel on my tie. Don't you hate it when people do sound checks on microphones? "CHECK, CHECK, Ch--ch--CHECK! Chickidy-Check! HELLO, hey, HEY, HEEEEY... yup, sounds good." I mean, what do you say while testing a microphone without sounding like a complete idiot? I don't know either, but I'm working on it...

I think it's funny when I speak at an FFA or 4-H conference and tell people that I grew up on a farm. Their response is always one of surprise as they tell me that they never would have guessed just by looking at me. Well, let me just say, "You can take the boy out of the country but YOU CAN'T TAKE THE COUNTRY OUT OF THE BOY!"

Lessons from Da Farm! YEEHAW!

When I was four years old, my family moved to the farm. The house was on a hill overlooking corn fields and pastures. My dad had cattle, hogs, chickens, and crops. YEEHAAAAW! My older brother, Ryan, was always complaining about how there weren't any malls, movie theatres, or people! Maybe I was too young, but it didn't bother me. Remember, I was the kid who could just

sit by himself in the corner and make up an entire imaginary world that kept him happy for many hours. The farm was an amazing opportunity while growing up. It helped me to find myself, appreciate nature, and tell a few stories.

PPR (Professional Pig Riding)

Ya know how girls say, "He swept me off my feet?" Well, I'm about to give that a whole new meaning. I was about six years old, and I was helping my dad in the hog pins. We were separating the younger pigs into different pins. Some people say hogs smell good; they're wrong. Because if they were right, you would walk into those magical candle stores, pick up a big brown candle, look at the sticker, and it would read, "Hog Manure!" and you would get excited, take a big sniff, and say, "Mmm... Hog Manure!" and then pass it around to your friends. But, let's face it. That will never happen!

Anyway, pigs are pigs. They just have a laid-back, "take-it-easy" attitude. They like playing in mud and causing a mess. So, I was standing in the middle of this pig pin, checking out the pigs, when all of a sudden, this little pink pig runs between my legs, picking me up and taking me on a magic carpet ride! Suddenly, I'm in the PBR ring trying to hold on for eight seconds! I was scared out of my mind, probably screaming for my daddy. It all ended up with me on my back in some sludge and trying to hold back the tears.

I usually have meaning and morals to stories, and I bet you're thinking, "What the heck is the point to this story?" Well, check this out. Leadership requires RISK, and if you are going to help others, you need to enter the ring and get in on the action. Sometimes, that means getting knocked around but that comes with RESPONSIBILITY!

Here's a warning. Watch out for pigs (lamesauces) because even though you are trying to help, they can catch you off guard and bring you down to their level. They might not mean anything by it. I mean, pigs will be pigs. But, if you're not careful, you might end up in the mud with them. In other words, people can do stupid things. You can choose to hang out with pigs, but in time, there's a good chance you will probably become one. WARNING: Stay out of the pig pin unless you're going in to clean them off ("helping lamesauces to become awesomesauces").

We risk a lot whenever we don't weigh the pros and cons, consult our head and heart, and make the best decision we can. Trust me, even after doing all of that, you might still make the wrong decision but you'll make far fewer bad decisions if you're a smart risk-taker. A smart risk-taker chooses to make the right decision even if it's not fun. By making right decisions every day, the smart risk-taker gets himself or herself to a place where he or she can do more, be more, and have more fun. Leaders make decisions based on what's right and what needs to be done. We can't expect to get where we want to be if we're not willing to do what it takes. In other words, you can't make it to second base in baseball with your foot still on first. Reflect, prepare, and then take a risk!

Ballroom Dance—in a Wheelchair?

I started ballroom dancing in college, and now I am a certified Ballroom Ninja! Yes, it is that intense. Salsa, swing, tango and about fifteen other dances in total make me a human weapon in the dance world. One of my favorite groups of people to teach is the elderly in retirement centers because when they get out there and dance, their minds forget they're, well, old. You can tell how much they love dancing even though it's mostly shuffling. EVERY DAY I'M SHUFFLING! (Sorry, I had to say that.) In addition to teaching the elderly, I teach students in elementary, middle, and high schools as well as at youth conferences. They learn the dances, but more importantly, they see how teamwork, self-discipline, leadership, courage, and etiquette come about. Each age level is cool in its own way, but all age levels are definitely different in their own way.

Elementary school student: "Dance is awesooooome! Yaayy!"

Middle school student: "I would rather torture myself than dance with the opposite sex."

High school student: (mostly silence) LOL.

I can proudly say that by the end of the lesson everyone loves dance no matter what their age. Why? Aren't most people, especially guys, scared or just not interested

in the ballroom dance stuff? Yeah, I think that's right, and I think it's true because they don't see themselves as the type of person who is able to dance. So, they don't like it. Let's face it, most people are not crazy about doing things they think they cannot do. On the other hand, if they start getting good at doing something, they will start liking it. ☺

Back to the question, why do almost all of my students enjoy the lesson? It is because I teach lessons in a way that is simple, funny, and engaging. For example, let's say we're learning a Tango. We start with very simple movements, and I explain them in very simple terms. I also explain in multiple ways because one person might understand with my first explanation while the next person will understand with the second explanation. Next, it's got to be a little bit funny—not taking it too seriously is important. This relieves pressure and allows the students to open up. Last, the moves get slightly harder as the students advance, thus, pushing along their confidence and (drum roll) ... fun. Suddenly, they like it because they see themselves able to dance.

Like anything else, whether it's a course in school or band class, the purpose should be to teach in a way that people WANT to learn. Sometimes we don't want to do things, but with the right teacher, anything can be fun and substantive.

Nothing I have done in the dance world has been more fun and substantive than my experience with wheelchair ballroom dance.

I was teaching at an able-bodied studio for about four years when a lady named JoAnne “rolled” through the studio door with her fellow wheelchair dance friends. I was like, “Ummm...” I didn’t know what they wanted. I mean, hopefully, not to dance, right?! She introduced herself to all of us and said their organization is called Groovability and they dance ballroom in wheelchairs. I was thinking, “Okay, that’s kind of cool... but how?” She said they will stay for the evening party and dance with anyone who was up to it. I couldn’t believe it! Talk about risk-takers! The studio was full of able-bodied people who couldn’t help but stare, but that didn’t scare JoAnne and her friends away.

I’m always up for something new, so I gathered up some courage and walked across the room, but before I could say anything, one of the wheelchair dancers, named Jennifer, wheeled up to me and confidently said, “Hey! Ask me to dance.” I was caught off guard. “Uh, okay, but I haven’t danced with anyone in a wheelchair.” She grinned, “Don’t worry; you’ll catch on.”

We rolled out onto the dance floor, and I took her arms and started to dance like I knew how but quickly realized that I couldn’t do a side step with the wheelchair because wheels can’t do that. I was doing my very best not to look like a complete idiot.

After a couple of moves I was thinking, “Piece of cake! I can do this.” I was at the peak of my confidence and started doing turns and other fancy dance moves with Jennifer. We were dancing fast, and quickly gathering attention from the whole studio. I then remembered a move I knew teaching able-bodied students and thought about how cool it would look with the wheelchair. I pulled her into an inside turn with a cradle wrap and then pulled her backwards as I usually do...

Here’s a tip for you all: If you ever find yourself in a situation where you’re starting to get real cocky, slap yourself.

Her front wheels came off the ground as I pulled and, like slow motion, I saw a disaster begin to unfold. As she was falling we both simultaneously raised our eyebrows and opened our mouths as if to say, "Oooohhhh, noooooo!" She hit the floor with a loud crash and fell out of the chair rolling onto the floor.

Complete silence fell upon the dance studio.

Everyone was staring at her and then at me. (I could tell she was a little upset.) "You can't do that move with a wheelchair," she said, trying to get up. Whoops. All the pride inside me deflated like a punctured balloon. It then hit me that I should help her, so I quickly reached out to help Jennifer get back into her wheelchair. She was still a little distressed. I mean, who wouldn't be? I felt so stupid for trying a fancy move without any practice. I guess that's where you cross the line from smart risk-taking to stupid risk-taking. I apologized, but that didn't make me feel any better. After about twenty minutes of slouching around, like I deserved some type of discipline, Jennifer rolled up to me again and said, "Hey, let's try it again." I couldn't help but smile and graciously accepted her offer. We rolled back onto the dance floor— except this time I took instruction mostly from her.

After that night I realized how much was at risk for me and the dancers, but I was also happy that I worked through my epic dance blunder because that's where most of us fail. When we try something new and it goes terribly wrong, we say, "I'm so stupid for thinking I could do that!" So we never try it again and try fewer new things in the future. You see, this is dangerous because the moment we stop trying and then quit, the next time something similar happens, it's even easier to quit. When we quit, we unknowingly start a habit of quitting. Epic failure is bad, but it's much worse if we don't learn from it and, instead, let it grow like a cancer and make us continuously fail in the future.

I learned from my “bad experience” and continued to practice to make myself better and give dance lessons, eventually becoming the lead instructor for Groovability. My awesome wheelchair dancers included Lorraine Cannistra, Lorie Sparks, Donna Wallis, Jennifer Simmons, JoAnne Fluke, and others. We danced at national competitions and have been featured on a national documentary on *TLC*, *Discovery Health*, and *FitTV*. As wheelchair ballroom dance continues to spread across the country, I continue to be inspired and push to be better. It’s true when I hear the quote, “The only true disability is a bad attitude.”

In the above story, you can see the leadership quality of being a courageous risk-taker. Courage is a key ingredient in a leader because courage is about pressing on and making the right decision even when you are scared, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. Remember, a lamesauce is someone who doesn't become all that they can, because they're not willing to do all that they need to do. The reason they aren't willing to do it is usually because they're not willing to take responsibility and take a risk. Some people confuse courage with not being afraid, but courage is actually being afraid and still doing it. Even when you land on your back in mud, because of pigs, or when you make a big mistake like I did dancing with Jennifer, you can always learn from it. But, you can't learn from not trying. Stretch yourself by trying something new and, maybe, even a little unfamiliar. It's the only way you'll grow into a true leader.

People Call Me Lem

I was heading back to the “Idaho 4-H Know Your Government” conference for the second year in a row. My first appearance at this conference was awesome. I gave a keynote speech the first night on how not to be a “lamesauce” and then that night I taught swing dance to over 200 youth. The next morning I led a workshop on “Connecting to Your Passion.” This year I put together a schedule similar to last year’s but with some new material.

The plane touched down in Boise, and after taking a short shuttle ride, I arrived at the hotel. I checked in and got everything unpacked. Students were already showing up, and there was excitement in the air. Some of the students who attended last year’s conference quickly remembered me. “Hey, you’re the speaker from last year—the ‘dance guy!’”

Around 6:30 p.m., while students were gathering outside the conference room waiting for dinner and my speech, I noticed a student standing alone in the corner. He had long brown hair down to his shoulders, and square-framed glasses hung on his nose. There was still some preparation I needed to do, but I felt a strong need to talk to this guy.

As I walked toward him I noticed he had some kind of condition. Later I learned it was Treacher Collins syndrome, a condition in which the facial bones and ear canals don’t fully develop. I couldn’t help but assume that maybe this was why he was standing by himself. Maybe he didn’t know anyone.

I know how much it sucks to feel like an outsider with no one to talk to. It’s one of the most uncomfortable feelings, and you just want to escape your body.

“Hey, I’m Brandon, how you doin’?” I asked.

He looked around not sure who I was or why I was talking to him. With a nervous, yet genuine, smile, he looked up. “Hey. People call me Lem.”

“Well, good to meet you, Lem! Is this your first year here?”

Quickly he responded, “Uh, yeah.”

“Sweet,” I replied, making sure I did not crowd him too much. “Are you an eighth grader?”

“Um, yeah, eighth grade.”

"Cool, well, I'm speaking tonight and I promise you're going to have a good time."

Lem smiled and looked around anxiously.

"Alright, man," I said, "I'll see you in there."

"See ya," he replied.

After leaving the hallway and entering the conference room I thought about how nice Lem seemed and hoped he would meet people and have a good time. Without giving it further thought, I prepared for my speech. Dinner was served. It was some type of chicken dish, but whatever it was, it was "DELISH!" Plates were eventually removed, and it was now "go time."

I started my speech just as rehearsed and everything was rolling along as planned. Then the part of my presentation came when I would bring up a volunteer who claimed to be a very over-the-top, cheesy actor or actress. Usually, this person would be jumping up and down with a big grin on his or her face—that's the type I look for. So, I asked for a volunteer and, sure enough, there was a guy who "fit the bill."

I said, "Okay, you with the tie on..."

He started to get up, but suddenly, someone right behind him popped up and literally jogged toward the stage. The guy I had called on looked confused and so did the people next to him, but then I realized my mistake.

ALMOST EVERY GUY THERE WAS WEARING A TIE!

Right before this very enthusiastic, mistakenly assumed-to-be volunteer hopped onto the stage, I saw who it was—Lem!

I didn't know what to think. Honestly, on the inside my initial feeling was, "Uh oh." I mean, did Lem really know what I was going to ask him to do? Would he be nervous? Would people laugh at him? These thoughts, however, were interrupted with Lem's beaming smile of confidence. Yeah—confidence. What?

"Okay, here we go," I thought. I went with it and explained that Lem would be acting out a day at school on stage as an "Awesomesauce." He would not talk at all, but instead, I would do the narrating. Without hesitation, he nodded his head as if he had been preparing for this night.

The skit began and I couldn't believe it!

Lem was AMAZING! He was acting out everything with creativity, confidence, and hilarious gestures! People were

laughing so hard and even I was cracking as I narrated. I didn't remember exactly how it happened, but at one point he dragged me into the skit and made everyone almost fall over laughing. At another point, he was to pretend to stick up for someone being bullied, so Lem pretended I was the person being bullied and started stroking my head. By the end of the skit most of the crowd was standing and cheering. It was a standing ovation.

After Lem sat down, I realized I couldn't stop smiling. In fact, I was holding back the emotion while trying to figure out what had just happened! Then I told everyone, "Out of all the times I have done this skit at schools and conferences, no one—I mean NO ONE—has done it better than how Lem did it just now."

The crowd erupted again in crazy applause.

Then I saw Lem's dad. He also had Treacher Collins. He was sitting down with his arms folded, and had a big smile on his face. I didn't think I had seen a prouder father.

What are the odds that I would have spotted Lem before the conference and talked to him? What are the odds that I would have picked on a student who happened to be right in front of Lem? What are the odds that Lem would have mistakenly thought I picked him? What are the odds that Lem would have surprised everyone and stolen the show?

Honestly, I think there was more than chance involved with what happened.

But, it would not have happened if Lem had not gotten out of his chair. It wouldn't have happened if Lem had not sucked up the courage to stand up and take a risk—even when others doubted him.

But Lem didn't stop there with impressing everyone. Af-

ter the speech, while the hotel staff was cleaning up the banquet room I walked in to find Lem helping them pick up the dishes and put things away. *This guy is amazing*, I thought. He was later recognized for his character of unexpected service.

Lem is a leader because he took the risk to believe in himself, and he inspired others to have courage. He showed everyone that it's not about the spotlight on stage but about the service when no one is looking.

Thank you, Lem.

RISK

-Author Unknown-

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To reach out for another is to risk involvement.
To expose your feelings is to risk
exposing your true self.

To place your ideas, your dreams before the
crowd is to risk loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To live is to risk dying.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest
tragedy in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing does nothing, is
nothing, has nothing.

They may avoid suffering and sorrow but they
simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, live.

Only a person who risks is free.

Risk Takes Courage. Courage Takes Risking.

These stories are about taking risks, but we can't take a risk without having courage. Many people think that to have courage is to not be afraid, but actually, courage is being afraid and doing it anyway.

Courage is a skill that can become a habit. If you do something courageous once then it will be easier to do it twice. Unfortunately, the same is true for fear. If you allow fear to stop you from doing what's right once, it will be easier for it to stop you the next time. Fear is like a supervillain, and courage is like a superhero. Fear can keep us from doing what's right and what needs to be done. Courage is doing what's right and required even if it's scary or unpopular. Fear is the enemy of courage and courage is the enemy of fear. Fear always involves risk, but courage always involves facing that risk.

Fear is not bad. I mean, we fear snakes and spiders for a reason. It's natural. Fear is only bad when we allow it to keep us from making the right decision. Fear is bad when we choose comfort over character. The only way to grow is to face your fears and risk some discomfort.

The good news is that the more you face your fears, the more your fears start to lose their powers. For example, you might have always been afraid of speaking in public, but the more often you do it, the

more control you will have over managing that fear. For example, I'm actually afraid of flying, but it's my job to fly around the country and speak. I've realized that if I take a month off, flying is scarier when I come back. If, however, I stay with it then flying isn't so bad.

So, think about what it is that you fear. Maybe it's public speaking or maybe it's a private conversation that you need to have with someone that has been delayed for too long. Maybe it's opening up that past incident that you would rather forget. Maybe it's sticking up for someone. Maybe it's quitting something that has a hold on you. Maybe it's trying out for something you're interested in but afraid of failing at.

Be brave. Take small bites out of your fear each day. Those small victories will eventually add up overtime to something big. Plus, you need to realize that although you live in the United States, you aren't necessarily free. True freedom includes freedom from your fears and negative emotions. When you can choose how to respond the way you want in every situation even when you're afraid...then...THEN...you are closer to true freedom.

Trust = Risk

These stories are also about trust. Jennifer had to trust me that I wouldn't tip her, but I did. I let her down. What do you think that did to her trust in me? She didn't trust me as much anymore. Think about a time when someone let you

down and broke your trust. Hurts, right? I know it does. I've let others down, and others have let me down. Whenever we get hurt, our natural reaction is to build walls around us so that no one can hurt us again. And, maybe we won't get hurt again, but we're trapped behind walls. We can't grow. GROWTH TAKES TRUST! Trust takes risk.

There is a smart way and a stupid way to trust. Walking up to a stranger and saying, "Hey, here's my wallet." Umm, probably not a smart way to trust. We have to earn people's trust, but we also have to let people earn our trust. In addition, we help limit the possibility that people will fail us. Jennifer could have helped prevent me from tipping her by saying, "Be careful not to push me too hard when you are holding my hand above my head because I might tip." Prevention is important, but so is forgiveness. Guard your heart but don't trap it behind walls.

Have you ever done the "trust test"? During a conference I called a volunteer to meet me on stage. She was a little nervous because she didn't know what I was going to do. "Leadership involves risk, and it's hard to separate risk from trust." I explained to the audience. "We usually don't risk things unless we trust in those things. For example, I'm not going to eat a certain food unless I trust it is clean and safe to eat. I'm not going to open up to someone unless I trust that person will listen and empathize with me."

I turned to my volunteer and said, "I'm going to put you through a 'Trust Test', so stand here with your feet together and arms out. You will fall like a tree, and you can trust

me to catch you.”

The look on this person’s face was priceless.

We counted her down, “3, 2, 1!” She started to fall, and just before she hit the ground, I caught her.

I asked her, “What was the scariest part of that? Was it when you were standing or when you were falling?” She responded that it was when she was falling.

It’s scariest when we have no control. Whenever we trust someone, we give up some control. All of us have been let down by someone, and when that happens, we have a tendency to build walls so we won’t get hurt again. Even though we may not get hurt we’re trapped behind our own walls. We cannot grow.

As leaders we have a responsibility to earn people’s trust, but we must also allow people to earn our trust. Don’t be dumb. Ronald Reagan said, “Trust, but verify.” It’s the balance between head and heart. Trust can be scary, and that’s why it takes courage. Remember, courage is doing the right thing even when you’re scared.

Be courageous. Be smart. Earn people’s trust. Allow others to earn your trust.

Be ready to catch someone when they’re falling.

KEY POINTS:

- Leadership requires RISK, because leadership involves responsibility to do what's right with the potential of failing.
- Growth takes trust. Trust takes risk. Risk takes courage.
- Courage is doing what's right even if it's scary.
- Risk involves fear, and fear is natural, but don't allow it to keep you from doing what needs to and should be done. Be courageous by taking small steps and having encouraging people and resources, like this book!