

HOW TO REACH A HALF CENTURY OF MAKING PEOPLE **WHOLE**

Bill Strickland

I spent a lot of 2018 in celebration and reflection. My organization reached a half century of making people whole. The milestone itself of having an African American-lead organization not only survive but thrive for 50 years is not something to take lightly. However, when I came across an article from The Foraker Group that 45,000–65,000 nonprofits are formed every year and every year about the same amount go out of business, it reminded me how close we've been to being one of those closing nonprofits.

A lot of factors go into avoiding that saddening statistic, but the most important is having a staff that buys into your core values.

In Pittsburgh's North Side amongst an abundance of industrial warehouses sits Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC), of which I am founder and Executive Chairman. It's a school that houses Manchester Craftsmen's Guild (MCG), which provides arts education for urban and at-risk youth, and Bidwell Training Center (BTC), a career training school for adults-in-transition. When you enter this Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired building and walk past the lobby that greets you with fresh orchids grown in our greenhouse, you'll reach our cafeteria where five banners hang displaying the words respect, embrace, shape, influence, and listen.

These banners aren't just for the students. It is just as important for the staff and myself. The transformation we're asking our students to undergo is very familiar to me because I and the organization have experienced it. Our example is the model for our students and for my staff. It's why every new employee receives a copy of my book *Making the Impossible Possible*.

After reading, the new employee knows that the transformation is never over because success is not a destination. Having a destination limits your potential to lead an

extraordinary life. You don't pursue success; you create it out of passion and values that matter to you every day.

Respect

Walking to high school at 16 years old was a daily struggle of the soul as I passed by sagging row house after sagging row house. Eventually this decaying landscape infected my mind and made me fall for the deadliest lie in the ghetto—your world is the whole world and your future and possibilities are already right before your eyes.

My mother, Evelyn, did her best to hold onto hope in the face of hopelessness. The decay never entered our home.

“Just because we're poor,” she'd say, “we don't have to live like defeated people.”

So every Saturday morning my brother and I got acquainted with our floors. With buckets of water, Ajax, and scrub brushes, my brother and I got on our knees and cleaned the entire house. While I was cleaning, I hated every minute of it, but seeing the shining floors when I was done gave me a sense of pride, and nothing beat my mother's smile at our accomplishment.

She was elegant and eloquent, and she instilled those characteristics in us. She hounded us about our hygiene, taught us manners, and demanded that we treat her and others with respect. She never surrendered a single inch to the ghetto.

With education being so important to my mother, I pretended to work hard at school out of respect for her. But with no future I could imagine, lack of desire to learn, and listening to burned-out and rambling teachers, I did enough to scrape by.

It all changed one morning on my way to homeroom when I came across a classroom that had the smell of coffee and the sounds of jazz emanating from the doorway. When I looked inside I was entranced at the sight of a man with his back towards me, rocking on a stool, and slowly moving his arms around a ball of

something grey and wet. I was mesmerized by what he was shaping out of that clay. When he looked up and greeted me, I was startled to see it was Frank Ross. I remembered Ross as a hip cat who had a passion for art and teaching and a reputation for treating his students like human beings.

After explaining to me his process, giving me a try at the potter's wheel, and encouraging me to sign up for his class, my life changed. There's magic in clay, and at the moment it was feeding a deep hunger in my soul. I found purpose in ceramics, but it was the mentorship with Ross that pushed me further than I could imagine. He recommended ceramics books that emboldened my interest, he lent me Brazilian jazz albums that allowed me to picture the world outside of Manchester, a poor inner-city neighborhood on Pittsburgh's North Side, and he exposed me to Frank Lloyd Wright's convention-defying architecture that was an escape from the dilapidated row houses.

He didn't care where I was from or what others might've thought of me. He exposed me to these different areas because he thought it would have meaning in my life, and if you walk into my school now, you'll see that it did.

In 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., riots erupted in my neighborhood. At 19 years old, as a response to the violence I opened MCG. I turned an abandoned row house into a sanctuary for the area youth with jazz playing and potter's wheels to teach ceramics. Like my mother did for me, I made sure the problems of the street ended at my doorway, and the

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way Ross taught me—I can dream my future in the same manner I shape a vessel out of clay—is the way I taught my students.

Embrace

Dizzy Gillespie was one of the first jazz masters to perform in our music hall. After touring him around the building and showing him the street kids bent over potter's wheels, single mothers running experiments in our laboratory technology classroom, laid-off factory workers pulling soufflés out of our commercial oven, he asked if I was a musician. I told him I don't even play an instrument. He raised his eyebrows at me and said, "This place is your instrument, man, and everything that happens here is your song."

I took me a while, but later I understood what he meant—my life is a long jazz improvisation. There is no formula or conventional wisdom. It's about taking risks and exploring new opportunities. How we embrace these improvisational demands defines us as musicians.

One of my toughest demands came when I took over BTC.

In 1972, I graduated cum laude from the University of Pittsburgh, and based on my success with MCG I decided to throw my hat in the ring to helm BTC, what was then a vocational training school founded by Bidwell Presbyterian Church that had let go of its entire management team.

I got the job, and on the first day I was greeted with a decaying warehouse, a \$300,000 IRS bill, one group of students smoking dope near the entrance, and another

cohort placing bets on how long I would last. That was the student body.

With a leaky roof, leaning walls, broken lights, and uneven floors, what more could you expect from the students? At MCG, I learned that respect breeds respect, and this disregard for the students was setting them up for failure.

One Friday before closing, I called a staff meeting and announced that we would all be painting the building that weekend. I let them know I would buy the paint and the beer and anyone that didn't show up would be fired. The next day everyone showed up except one person, and I fired that person. It let the staff know I meant business and that the culture was going to change.

However, I knew I needed help. I convinced my college friend Jesse Fife to come on board and help me out. Eventually, we moved to a much less depressing warehouse but were still having financial troubles. I found the answer at IBM.

After persuading an IBM salesman to introduce me to the person responsible for the IBM operation in Pittsburgh, I met Ed Conrad and things started changing for the better. IBM's new Selectric typewriters would need typists trained to use the machine. We partnered with IBM to create a training program just for the Selectric, and it took off. This approach was the answer to the slumping demands for trade jobs. We soon partnered with other companies like Warner Cable, Covestro, Heinz, and other industries to help create training programs for in-demand careers. This foundational change has helped transform BTC from a poverty program to an Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges School of Excellence.

Shape

Things were starting to change for BTC's students but the financial issues persisted, and the warehouse we were in at the time was only marginally better than BTC's original home.

In December of 1982, I had to gather the staff and let them know that we wouldn't meet payroll, and had to

let a third of the staff go before Christmas. After hearing the news, K. Leroy Irvis, a Pennsylvania politician, a father figure to Fife and I, and the first African American speaker of any house after Reconstruction, worked out an arrangement that allowed us to make payroll. However, I knew this was just a stopgap and something needed to change.

I locked myself in my office and stared across the street at a destroyed lot about the size of a football field filled with the ashes and burnt remains of houses that went up in flames during the riots. That day the way the light hit that deterioration made me see something else. It was the same light that I had seen when Ross took me and my classmates to see Wright's Fallingwater, his residential masterpiece that is now a National Historic Landmark that defines organic architecture. Staring at the rot, I was startled by a vision of a sleek, earth-toned building that was honeycombed with windows and skylights that allowed that golden light in. I realized our biggest issue was being housed in environments that I didn't shape. You can clog leaks and paint the walls a different color all you want, but if you don't fix the bones then you're not fixing the soul of your environment.

I knew I needed to build this vision where I could capture that light, put both MCG and BTC under one roof, and add everything whole and healing I had ever known in my life.

Weeks later, I was in Tasso Katselas's office without a dime in my pocket, asking this successful student of Wright's to design my vision. All I needed was a model that I could show people and I needed it right away. He agreed, and I traveled to every corporate boardroom and foundation in the city looking for funding.

I was fortunate enough to have built a strong network of friends and powerful allies but that didn't stop the raised eyebrows when they saw my plan. Whenever they asked whether I wanted to build this in Manchester I said I was *going* to build it in Manchester, when they would call it a poverty center I would correct them by calling it a world-class training center, when they asked why it needed a fountain I said it lets students know they deserve success, and

when they scoffed at the \$5 million budget I let them know everything in the vision was *needed* in Manchester. Little by little I got conditional pledges that would be released only if I got matching funds, and fortunately enough Governor Dick Thornburgh was able to provide the match with the help of my friend Diana Jannetta and Mr. Irvis.

We broke ground in 1984 and construction was complete two years later. Four years after not being able to meet payroll, I was walking through my vision. The color and texture of the walls, the floors, the fabrics were all capturing that light I saw. With this new center, corporate heavyweights who wouldn't step foot into the old warehouse wanted to be part of this new space and culture. We were no longer a social obligation, but a state-of-the-art training program that was putting poor people at the cutting edge of emerging opportunities.

Influence

After the success at the new Pittsburgh center, we got a lot of attention. Nancy Wilson appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" to promote the Christmas album she recorded on our MCG Jazz label, I was appointed to the National Endowment for the Arts in 1996, and I won a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (popularly known as "Genius Grants"). The awards and recognition are nice, but I'm nowhere near done.

Poverty is the cancer of the human spirit, and to cure it you have to provide access to beauty, order, purpose, and opportunity. This lesson is relevant around the world, and I want to open at least 1,000 of these centers. However, this isn't McDonald's. We're not

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mass-producing burgers through an assembly line. You can have the same architecture, and programming, but you won't succeed if you don't have the right leaders. I learned this from Jeff Skoll.

I started taking a box of slides with me across the country with pictures of our building, programming, and transformed students to conferences, city council meetings, and any place willing to listen.

In the fall of 1999, this old box of slides ended up in front of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, a charitable foundation established by some of the biggest names in the tech industry. In the audience was Skoll, who came up to me after my presentation excited about my message and wanting to learn more about my plans. He told me the name of the company he worked for but I didn't recognize it at the moment. There wasn't time to talk with all the people gathered, but I took his business card. When I returned to Pittsburgh and learned from a student what eBay was, I immediately replayed the interaction with Skoll in my head making sure I hadn't brushed him off rudely by mistake.

With his help, we opened Bayview Hunters Point Center for the Arts and Technology (BAYCAT) in San Francisco. Skoll had already formed the Skoll Community Fund, a charitable foundation that encourages socially responsible entrepreneurship. He was the one that made me change my approach to replication. This was no longer about making a dream a reality. We are now selling a product—our model. Looking at it this way meant we were selling the solution to a problem corporations and government officials were already facing, and that setbacks weren't defeats but detours. We wrote a business plan and the Skoll Community Fund gave us a sizable grant that gave us the funding and support we needed to open BAYCAT.

At the moment, we have 12 centers in the United States including our Pittsburgh home. Cities include Boston; Brockway, Pa.; Buffalo; Chicago; Cincinnati; Cleveland; Grand Rapids, Mich.; New Haven, Conn.; San Francisco; and Sharon, Pa. In addition, we have

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a center in Akko, Israel. We also have more centers signed on to open in other cities.

Listen

When it comes to listening, it is as important to listen to others as it is to listen to yourself.

From my first finished ceramic piece to opening MBC, it was all done because it was something I felt I had to do. Advancing my career was nice, and helping poor folks motivates me greatly, but these are not the reasons I do this.

I never had a strategy. In order to never fall for the lie that the world around me is the whole world, I need to shape my environment to match the way I want to feel.

You have to listen to what your soul is telling you, and build a life or organization that matters to you.

When people interact with my employees and ask me how I find such high-quality, motivated employees, I tell them I don't find them. They find me.

The people we want to hire do a lot of listening before they even approach us for a position. They've bought into our philosophy and our story before I even introduce myself because they feel they have to be working for this organization. Working here is the only way to be themselves.

Conclusion

If you stood each employee in front of those banners in the cafeteria and asked them what each core value means to the organization, they would all tell you a

different story because we've encouraged and insisted that they add a bit of themselves into the story. When they do that, they embrace possibility and shape their work in ways that stimulates their own personal growth. When they push themselves, they end up pushing me too, and that makes the whole so much more than the sum of its parts.

Contributing: Joel Mora



As Founder and Executive Chairman of Manchester Bidwell Corporation and its subsidiaries, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, Bidwell Training Center, and National Center for Arts and Technology, Bill Strickland has created an educational model designed to create empowering educational environments for adults-in-transition as well as urban and at-risk youth, enriching Southwestern Pennsylvania, and the world. Throughout Strickland's distinguished career, he has been honored with numerous prestigious awards for his contributions to arts and the community, including the coveted MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. He is also the author of Make the Impossible Possible.