

Who Do You Serve?

BY RICHARD SHERIDAN

Editor's Note: This is a guest post authored by Richard Sheridan, author of [Joy, Inc.](#), and CEO, Chief Storyteller, and co-founder of Menlo Innovations. Richard was the opening keynote speaker at the 2017 [Leadership Connections™](#) national conference, which is hosted by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.

I had the great honor of addressing the annual Leadership Connections national conference in May in Chicago. My goal was to inspire two actions on the part of the many leaders in the audience:

1. Encourage the leaders to leave with a mindset to “run the experiment” and break free from the mindset of “that won’t work here.”
2. Encourage them all to crack open the copy of Joy, Inc. in each person’s book bag. (I was so committed to this goal that I took my entire speaker fee and bought copies for all of the conference attendees.)

Every once in while a new thought is born in such a talk. This was one of those moments for me. When I speak of joy in the context of work, I encourage everyone, especially leaders, to first look outside the organization with a simple question:

Who do you serve? And what would delight look like for them?

While I told the famous “run the experiment” story about Menlo babies, I also touched on the story of Buster the Great Dane. If you were at the conference, you’ll recall that at Menlo Innovations, we have a tradition of having dogs in the office (Our lease language allows up to three. ... We are currently at that limit!).

However, the Buster story was a little different. In this case, Buster was the dog of one of our customers. He asked if he could bring Buster in for his weekly Show & Tell with our team. We said yes, and that day this gentle giant of a dog was in our space. He greeted me warmly by putting his paws on my shoulders, and suddenly my 6’5” frame felt small as Buster was looking down on me!

As I discussed in my talk, the real story behind Buster’s visit was that our customer was choosing to be more like us when he interacted with us. He couldn’t bring Buster into his workplace (it wouldn’t be

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appropriate as he works in a medical lab). But, when he interacted with us, he chose to join our cultural mindset. This can be a powerful and beneficial side effect of a great work culture.

It was at this moment in my talk, as I thought hard about all of the leaders in early childhood and the challenges they face every day. I can easily imagine that one of the biggest obstacles they face is that, as hard as they try to create the very best nurturing environment possible for their young charges, sometimes children live in home or community environments that are stressful or even toxic.

What if?

What if the effect of the learning environment was so compelling that the families in your program wanted to bring the lessons of your program home with them? What if each and every day, you were making a difference in many of the homes of the families you serve? What kind of impact could that make in the world?

If there is one central lesson I have learned over the years, it is that we humans are wired to serve others, to be in community with one another. We desire to work on something much bigger than ourselves. What better place to do this than with our children.

I know the work is hard, and there are likely days that are unrewarding. As I state in Joy, Inc., joy and happiness are not the same! We can't possibly hope to be happy every minute of every day.

Yet, the joy comes from seeing the effects of the work of our hearts, our hands, and our minds play out in the world we serve. If you can cultivate a supportive learning culture and run experiments that allow the joy of your early childhood program to go home with the children and their families, you would have done wonderful work to advance our world in ways that are so desperately needed.

I wish you joy in the journey ahead!

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