

Coveralls & Tell-Alls

EVERYTHING YOU NEED
TO KNOW ABOUT
LEADERSHIP I LEARNED
ON THE FARM

Sheila Webb Pierson



INDIE BOOKS
INTERNATIONAL

Contents

1	My Gateway Crime	7
2	Be Proud of Where You Come From	9
3	Confessions of a Hayseed: Admit Your Mistakes	21
4	Communicate Until the Cows Come Home	35
5	Leaders Serve Others	43
6	Live with Passion and Purpose	51
7	How to be Influential without Getting Shot	55
8	Being Influential Should Not Be a Crime . .	69
9	Learning from a Redneck on the Golf Course.	81
10	Mistakes are Forgivable.	89
11	Never Hype Your Serving Others.	95
12	What Will Your Legacy Be?.	103
	About the Author.	111



CHAPTER 1

My Gateway Crime

Frozen in fear, I stood silently staring down the barrel of a pistol. While not sure what kind of pistol, I clearly recognized it was a gun. The make and model seemed a bit unimportant at this moment in time.

The police officer holding the gun was intense. He screamed at me, “Get down! Get down!”

How does someone who is teaching a business training class find herself in such a predicament? A million questions flashed through my head but the most daunting one was: “Where did my life of crime start?”

I am just a simple farm girl from the Ozarks. Was this going to be the legacy that I leave? *Seriously*, I have college degrees in agriculture.

Actually, this book is not about my life of crime, but what I have learned about leadership. In the corporate world, we are taught that leadership is all about influence:

*Influence = Strength + Intelligence
+ Go-To Person + Communication Skills*

Based on that model and my early escapades in my corporate career, becoming influential seemed a bit out of reach for someone like me.

I have noticed through the years that a different model is actually more effective. Interestingly enough, it is the same model my dad taught me from the farm:

*Influence = Be Proud of Where You Came From
+ Admit Mistakes + Communicate
+ Laugh at Yourself + Serve Others*

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a collection of confessions that will explain everything you need to know about leadership. I promise.



CHAPTER 2

Be Proud of Where You Come From

I was born in Arkansas and raised on a small dairy farm. Everything I needed to know about leadership I learned on the farm. Or, should I say, I learned from a farmer.

I was fortunate to have a close family and be blessed with good parents. Growing up on a farm isn't glamorous. Oh no; farm life is not like living in a rustic log house, doing chores two hours a day, and then reading a newspaper on the front porch with a perfectly groomed collie resting peacefully under your feet. Television has missed reality just a tad. If you want a reality show that is the real deal, try farming for a living.

We lived in a small but modern red brick house on 120 rolling acres in the Ozarks straddling the

Arkansas-Oklahoma border. Again, film and TV will always paint a picture of a green, grassy knoll. Northwest Arkansas, where our farm resided, is far from that. Grassy yes, for about four months out of the year. We were lucky to be able to experience all four seasons. On rare occasions (not really that rare) we could experience all four in one day. Yep, that is true.

Our farm was unique in that we had meadows, a wooded area with wildlife, hay fields, and a cemetery. The cemetery was not ours or even reserved for our family. It belonged to another family. However, the cemetery added a value for me as I was growing up. There is nothing better for a fall party than playing hide-and-seek in the dark through an overgrown cemetery. Maybe that is why I enjoy Halloween so much.

We had many barns, one of which was our dairy barn. Our dairy barn was moderately modern as well. A dairy barn is basically a cement brick building housing two main compartments. The first is the area where we milked the cows.

For our enterprise, the cows were ushered into one of two sides of this first area. Each side had room for six cows at a time. This meant we could milk twelve cows at once. Each station had a stainless steel bowl that held grain so the cows could eat while we attached the milkers.

In the middle of the two aisles of cows was a pit, an alley of sorts. That is where I spent what turned out to be years of my life. It wasn't glamorous, but it was noble and important work. We made certain each cow had grain in her bowl; we washed her udder, attached the milker, and then removed everything when she was empty.

The other compartment was our milk room. Once the milk left the cow, it traveled in a maze of stainless steel pipes to the milk room and landed in a giant tank. That tank housed the milk at a controlled temperature until a tanker truck came to empty it.

Our milk truck driver's name was Charlie, and he came every other day. He was about six feet four inches, 180 pounds, and always had a grin on his

face. Visiting with Charlie was always a bright spot in the day.

Charlie always had the gossip. Living and working on a farm sometimes limited our ability to properly interact with our neighbors, so we were always starved for good gossip. For instance, Randy and Kate were getting a divorce. Randy had chickens as well as dairy cattle. According to Charlie, that became a little too mundane for Kate. My mother, Charlotte Webb—yes, I’m serious, that is her name, so she went by Janie—told Charlie, “Kate was just too pretty for Randy,” then grinned with this compassionate smirk. My mother always liked to sugarcoat things. That, my friends, is sarcasm. My mother is blunt and can never understand why people get their feelings hurt. “People are just too sensitive anymore,” she was always saying.

I think most people have this view of us Southern women as being genteel, matronly belles who dress to the nines and often need naps due to our delicate natures. Scarlett O’Hara we are not. I was born into a family of very strong Southern women as role models. My mother’s mother, Grandma Jessie,

was raised in Shawnee, Oklahoma during The Dust Bowl. And she survived. She was a “Rosie the Riveter” in World War II. What that translated to was a very independent woman who never feared sharing an opinion. Let me assure you, Grandma Jessie’s opinion was the only one that mattered. If she wanted to express an opinion, then I needed to listen. But I always felt she earned that right. Remember, she was a survivor.

My mother was innately very similar. We did have our rules of hospitality. So, as blunt as my matriarchal society was, it was imperative we always said it with a smile, to soften the blow, or more likely, to just confuse our audience. It can really be a vernacular talent to insult and compliment someone in the very same breath—a talent that only works for the women of the South, not the men.

We had three or four John Deere tractors. My father was an avid John Deere fan. But despite his loyalty to the green machines, seldom did more than one tractor work at any given time. Of course, that just depends on your definition of “working tractor.” My dad loved to tinker with his tractors. In fact, he

restored a John Deere Model M that he would later drive in parades and allow my children to steer.

We raised Guernsey cows with a sprinkle of other breeds like Holstein, Jersey, and even Brown Swiss. However, Guernsey was the special breed to my father. He became a world-renowned breeder.

My chore each day was caring for the babies. Newborn dairy calves appear to be cute. You might even consider them to be adorable. But let me tell you, *nothing* could be farther from the truth. They were like little demons. Dairy product companies like Kraft and Borden portray them in their advertisements as helpless creatures running and grazing through beautiful green meadows. Their pictures of dairy calves almost had them smiling. Some of them even talk in the television commercial. Here's the fact you need to know about these fuzzy brown and white critters: calves don't smile. The only time ours showed me their teeth was before they tried to take a bite out of me.

The truth is these calves are waiting—maybe even plotting in baby cow tongue—to attack you. I was

responsible for feeding each calf one bottle full of milk each morning around 6:00 a.m. I know what you are thinking—how fun. Just like a petting zoo. Hardly.

The newborns were tough. There is no coaxing a hungry calf. It runs from you, kicks at you, and lays down in a retreat mode, but will not drink milk from a bottle. They slam their little jaws tight like crocodile jaws. Trying to get their mouths open so they can taste fresh milk is next to impossible. Even when I could get the nipple past their lips, the resistance kicked in. They would stare at me with those giant solid brown eyes squinting stubbornly, as if they were plotting their next move. It was a battle of the wits. Apparently I didn't have much wit, because I frequently needed my dad's help.

The older calves were almost as bad once they became accustomed to my bringing food. They impatiently waited for breakfast or supper by kicking and running in their pens. They would go crazy the second I dropped the bottle over the fence and latched it to the gate. They would drink their milk in seconds and then demand more.

On occasion, they butted their bottle right out of the holder. This left me with the unenviable task of retrieving it. I would climb over the fence because we never had gates on hinges. All our fence sections were tied together with baling twine or wire. Once I was within reach of the calf, I was met with a hungry mouth pulling at any piece of clothing it could grab. As soon as my feet hit the hay floor, the calves would run and butt me in the stomach, side, backside—anywhere to get my attention.

The message was clear: “I want more. Moooooore!”

I sometimes had nightmares of a pen full of baby Guernseys attacking me. Like someone drowning in water, the last thing you would see is my hand in a desperate motion for help. That would be me under a sea of hungry Guernsey calves.

This happened twice a day, every single day of my young life. Before school and after school. I was always jealous of my friends who didn't have any chores. I wondered what it was like to just get up and go to school. If I ever complained, my dad would always say, “You are learning every day from your chores. How lucky are you?” Lucky, really?

Summer brought my most dreaded chore—hauling hay. Obviously, storing hay was critical for those long winter months. After the fields of grass died in late fall, hay and grain made up the cows' winter diet. It didn't matter how important hay was; I dreaded every moment of the process.

So did my brother, Lonnie, who was two years older than me. Lonnie was not a fit for farming. He was a fan of Doctor Who and was devoted to Atari. He was the only person I knew who wore a fifteen-foot crocheted scarf in July (see "fan of Doctor Who"). I struggled to connect with him, as did most of the teenage population in Lincoln, Arkansas. I remember telling my friends that my brother had a rare disease that made him behave badly, but since my dad was a teacher, he had connections and kept him in the general high school population.

Arkansas summers are hot and humid. Because I was the only girl in my family, I got the advantage of being the truck driver during hay season. The hay bales we hauled for our cows were all square bales. Round bale equipment didn't arrive at my house until the mid-1980s. Until then, I drove a

giant truck and three boys would stack square bales on the back.

Our truck had no air conditioning, or heat for that matter. I kept both windows open in hope of catching just a hint of an occasional breeze. The heat was almost unbearable. I would be covered in sweat in minutes. To make matters worse, slivers of the freshly cut hay would stick to my sweaty skin and clothes. I was always so covered that my mom wouldn't let me sit down on the furniture when I went into the house for a break. I was too gross for my own mother.

It was indeed unglamorous. I was the only girl at my prom with a farmer's tan. When I got frustrated at my obvious skin discoloration earned during those long hours working on the farm, my dad reminded me, "Be proud of where you come from. If you aren't, nobody else will be."

Farm life was tough, yet at the same time enjoyable, and my family worked together. I probably wouldn't have changed it, but I spent many hours of my younger years wondering how the other half lived.

Some of the most fun I had was doing crazy things with friends. They didn't usually live or work on a farm. That fact alone made some of our experiences entertaining.

Here's a little secret. We farm folk have our own way of communicating. A farmer's code, with terms and phrases like fair-to-middling, let me tell you how the cow ate the cabbage, Lord willing and the creek don't rise, come-to-Jesus meeting, one too many roosters in the hen house, once an egg-sucking dog always an egg-sucking dog, and more. We might even be guilty of leading the discussion about the intellectually challenged with the phrase "bless their hearts." If you are from the South, you most likely realize that that phrase is not a statement of empathy.

For instance, when one of our hired hands shut a gate after we pulled the truck through, he shut it with him on the opposite side. Faced with this object between himself and his transportation, he decided to climb over the gate. This was a cardinal sin! You never crawl over a gate because it put stress on the hinges. Dad sat in the truck watching this comedy unfold in the side-view mirror and shaking

his head. He muttered under his breath, “Bless his heart.” Translated: *That boy is as dumb as nails*. I knew if we ever experienced a zombie apocalypse, that kid was going to be one of the first to go.

I can say the willingness to get dirty has always defined us as a nation, and it's a hallmark of hard work and a hallmark of fun, and dirt is not the enemy.

– Mike Rowe
