Positive leadership in action: Applications of POS by Jim Mallozzi, CEO, Prudential Real Estate and Relocation

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In this interview with Jim Mallozzi, CEO of Prudential Real Estate and Relocation Company, Mallozzi describes the variety of ways in which he has implemented principles and practices emerging from positive organizational scholarship. He was exposed to POS in the mid-2000s as a senior officer in Prudential Retirement, and after becoming chief executive officer (CEO) of Prudential Real Estate and Relocation Company in 2009, he actively engaged POS to address the challenges and difficulties faced by his firm. Among the POS practices Mallozzi implemented were utilizing positive energy networks to create a “change team,” developing a reciprocity network among company employees, articulating Everest goals, fostering positive leadership in the senior team, celebrating strengths, successes, and achievements, reflected best-self feedback, and demonstrating caring and compassion with customers and potential customers. As a consequence of these initiatives, he achieved the successful merger of two culturally different organizations, dramatic improvements in financial performance, improved customer satisfaction scores, and markedly enhanced employee engagement. This interview provides provocative examples of how a leader can make a major impact in his organization’s performance by creatively applying positive organizational scholarship.

Could tell us about when you came to Prudential, the challenges you faced, and how POS fit in as tool to help you face those challenges?

I was brought into Prudential Retirement in the spring of 2004 as the head of integration. The company had just acquired a big division from the Cigna Corporation, and we were trying to merge the two cultures together. In the beginning it was like trying to merge the Red Sox and the Yankees; we had two distinct cultures — one from New England and the other one from the New York/New Jersey area. Both were very strong, very passionate, and very powerful. As you can imagine, trying to put these two cultures together was a challenge. The president at the time happened to be a graduate of the University of Michigan. He had just come back from a session there where he had met Bob Quinn and Kim Cameron and learned about positive organizational scholarship. He brought them into the company to help us create something that was really different and outstandingly unique. We embarked on a journey that fit with a lot of things I had always wanted to do and was consistent with my own outlook on life. It helped us very successfully integrate the cultures, and the company went on to produce some record earnings. I think that POS helped us create the benchmark for how you take two distinct companies and put them together.

How long did that process take, and how did you implement it?

It was a conscious two year effort that involved not only the senior leadership who led from the front, but virtually everybody in the entire organization needed to be part of it. It was fun to see all the different groups put their own little twist on POS. There were a variety of tools and techniques that we implemented. One was the reflected best-self feedback process, which we became really good at. Another was the use of the competing values framework, which is how we demonstrated respect for each other in terms of what unique attributes each person brought to the table. A third was the development of an Everest goal, or what we aspired to be and what we stood for. A lot more change tools were also put in place at the time, which I leveraged in some of my later responsibilities.
WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OF THIS IMPLEMENTATION?

The primary outcome was the assimilation of the two companies. We kept 95 percent of our clients. Our annual employee satisfaction scores and employee opinion survey results increased. We had less voluntary turnover, and the earnings of the company started going up at about 20 percent per annum on a compound rate. It was a real success story. In addition, when the president left to take a job in a different company, the culture and the practices actually stayed in place. Often times, change efforts do not sustain themselves when you have a change in leadership. I would argue the real test of change efforts is whether they are sustained when the leader leaves. In our case, they were.

YOU WERE THEN APPOINTED AS THE CEO OF PRUDENTIAL REAL ESTATE AND RELOCATION. WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES YOU FOUND?

In the summer of 2009, as the financial markets were coming out of one of the worst recessions since the great depression, I was asked to take over Prudential’s Real Estate and Relocation business (PRERS). The real estate side sells residential and commercial real estate franchises across North America. The relocation side helps families move throughout the world. It serves both U.S. government employees and large corporations. When I took over in the fall of 2009, we were facing a $70 million loss per year. The company had lost $140 million the year before. So as I came into the company, I had the opportunity to travel around and see what the morale was like for the associates. Before I arrived, they had shown the beach scene from Saving Private Ryan in an attempt to motivate our associates. If you remember, there is a scene on D-Day where people are being killed all over the place. Body parts are flying and bombs are going off. The trouble is, our associates interpreted this as: “Anyplace but here.” Some of the folks in my company actually had encouraged me to play it again to show that I was symbolically in alignment with the previous CEO in terms of cost-cutting. I rejected that. I could see that the organization just didn’t have confidence in itself. Morale in our company and among our customers was not high.

SO, HOW DID YOU ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES OF MAJOR RED INK AND POOR MORALE THROUGHOUT PRERS?

I harkened back to my Prudential Retirement days and what I learned about positive organizational scholarship. The message was, let’s look at what we have, as opposed to what we don’t have. Let’s look at what we can do as opposed to what we don’t do. How do we start to take the limits off our company, not in terms of just going back to where we were two years or five years ago, but how do we achieve something that is truly great and never seen before in our industry? I called my good friend Kim Cameron and asked him to help me with the change effort. We started by bringing in Kim to work with our senior management team — what we call the “Gang of 30.” Some of them were very reticent; others were curious. Fortunately, they were all patient.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY DID YOU DO WITH YOUR SENIOR TEAM? HOW DID YOU START THE PROCESS TO TURN AROUND THE COMPANY?

We started with a variety of exercises to show them that when you start with the positive, when you ask people to genuinely help you achieve what you’re trying to do, fabulous things can happen. One very simple exercise — and it’s an exercise I’ve now done, oh goodness, dozens of times — is a great positive energizer. In the next three minutes, select three people, one at a time, and tell those people three things you value about them. In corporate America, and in most places in life, people usually tell you, “Here are the three things that you need to change.” Rarely do they tell you, “Here are the three things that you’re fabulous at.” When you do that, the energy just goes up. So that was the start. Okay, we’re off the beach. Nobody’s dying any more. The body parts have been buried. We’re now saying, “Okay, let’s start with what we have, because we have some fabulous attributes. So we started with that very simple but powerful exercise, and it got people’s attention.

POSITIVE FEELINGS ARE ONE THING, BUT TURNING AROUND THE FIRM IS ANOTHER. HOW DID YOU TRANSLATE POSITIVE EMOTIONS INTO POSITIVE ACTIONS?

Well, after talking about positive strengths, we said, “OK, let’s translate this into action.” We engaged in an activity that was a variation on Wayne Baker’s reciprocity ring exercise. Each of us had to take a sticky pad and put up a current problem we were trying to solve. Mine was trying to recruit some new senior leaders into the company. At the time I didn’t have a head of HR. I didn’t have a head of marketing. I needed a new head of business risk and I needed a new head of sales. We needed all sorts of things in the company. So, I put up my problem on the board, and we invited 30 people to do the same thing — “Here is the current business problem I’m trying to solve.” Then we invited the 29 other folks to positively contribute. In my case, I got several really helpful ideas from the group. Our general counsel was a little bit skeptical at the time, and he approached the exercise, essentially, by saying, “OK, I’m going to stump the crowd here.” So he offered this challenge: “I’m trying to hire excellent legal advice for our office in France.” He was sure that no one could help him, since most of the folks in the room were from the U.S. But, sure enough, out of that group of 30 people, he got four great ideas. Somebody had a brother-in-law who had gone to law school in France. Somebody else had a good friend that was part of a big Paris law firm. He got a lot of different ideas. It really is one of those POS examples of reciprocity. The point is, when we invite others to help in a positive way, we can never predict where fabulous ideas come from. We started to see the energy in the group increase. They recognized that when they readily shared their challenge and openly asked others for help, they couldn’t predict where help would come from. They
could see by working together that they could solve their own problems faster and better.

**DID THIS ACTIVITY TRANSLATE INTO THE REST OF THE ORGANIZATION?**

About four months later we held our big annual convention. We invited 2,500 real estate agents from all over the country, and you can imagine they were a pretty energetic crowd. We met in the Austin Convention Center, and this was my first presentation to this group as the new CEO. I wanted to engage the crowd and ask for ideas about how we can make our company better. Well, the professional speechwriters advised against it and literally deleted this part from my speech three times. They said, “No, you shouldn’t stop the show. It will distract people. It’s the wrong thing to do. You don’t want to get people engaged in a conversation when you’re giving a speech to a large audience. They are there to listen. You are there to talk.” Well, I decided to try something different anyway. In the middle of my keynote address, I asked for the houselights to come up. I asked everybody to take out their Blackberries and their iPhones and turn them on as opposed to turn them off. I asked them all to text or e-mail one great idea — how to get a new client, how to close a sale, how to keep a customer for life. I said, “Take your very best idea, your absolutely best one, and share it. You will be sharing it with the person three rows behind you, down the convention center, across the hall. Let’s do it right now.” “I had somebody bring my Blackberry on stage, and I participated as well. We did that for about four or five minutes, and then I invited them to continue to do it for the next 36 hours — until the end of the convention. Do you know how many ideas we came up with? Over 2,200. When we sorted all the duplicates and a couple of those that, well, were just nonsensical, we had 900 unique ideas. One person sent 197. We’ve been using those ideas for the last 15 months. One office sends out one idea to each of its sales associates every day, and they said, “It gave us ideas for three years.” In 36 hours, we generated an idea a day for three years. That wasn’t about me. It was about creating a positive network.

**SO, DID YOU SHARE THE 900 IDEAS WITH THE COMPANY?**

We did, but we went further than that. This year our annual convention was in San Diego. We launched an on-line network called NextWork — what’s next and what works. Think of it as kind of Facebook for grownups where we are sharing ideas, sharing best practices, helping each other on a 24/7 basis. We’ve set up chat rooms where people can go in and explore different categories together. It allows people to have a voice when they normally wouldn’t have one, when they do not know who to talk to, when they may not know how to get their ideas heard in a larger community. We’re seeing a lot of younger people, a lot of people with less experience, now being coached by people who have more experience. So we’ve taken that very simple idea of reciprocity — just ask for help and you never know where help comes from — and we are building it into the very culture of our company using technology and social networking to keep it alive 24/7.

**WERE THERE OTHER EXAMPLES OF THIS KIND OF INTERVENTION IN PRERS?**

Yes. One of the things we needed to do was to start to reinvent ourselves and our processes, or to give us the latitude to experiment on being “positively deviant,” as I like to say. We turned to another Michigan professor — Jeff DeGraff — for some help, again building on the principles of POS. Jeff helped us look at doing a lot of small experiments with positive deviance rather just the traditional big corporate development projects that take sometimes years to measure. Borrowing from the Hockey saying of “you can’t win if you don’t shoot,” we created the “Shoots on Goal” program. We allowed line managers to try different experiments aimed at delighting our customers and supply chain. Our client services scores in our Relocation Company had taken a beating during the down-sizing of the recession, and, quite honestly, many of our customers were not very happy with us. So we started with some experiments and looked at examples of where we did well with clients. We looked deeply at not only who but also what and how this was being accomplished. Then we used these folk as positive examples, trying to clone them in the eyes of others. They became the unofficial mentors to others in these departments. We experimented with different staffing models, getting folks closer to the ultimate customer, and celebrating when we did things well. It was so fun to watch and measure! Believe it or not, things started to improve in all sorts of ways. Our client satisfaction scores started to increase, and with every increase, people where encourage to strive for even more “positive deviance.” It almost became like a game. After 18 months of trial and error, our services scores have never been higher. Some units actually achieved 100 percent satisfaction with some of our toughest clients. The best part of the whole program is that each and every idea implemented came from our associates. Not one was from me.

**WHAT ROLE DID YOU AND YOUR SENIOR TEAM PLAY?**

I believe that to truly implement POS, you must be willing to be visible and vulnerable at the same time. If your team thinks you have all the answers to their problems, they will bring you every problem to get an answer. Well, I know I’m not smarter than 1,200 associates, so it really was a case of setting an example in a very public way that it is OK to set positive goals, to look for inspiration around us, and to be open to help from anywhere in pursuit of that goal. As I said, when I took over in 2009, the company wasn’t doing very well. We had lost a lot of money. After taking a small amount of time to travel around to listen to our associates, our clients, our franchisees, and our real estate franchise agents, I laid out my objectives and invited all of our employees to help me. Our objective was straightforward: to reconnect to our core mission to be Welcoming and Welcomed. Simply put, we needed to be welcoming in our approach and welcomed for our expertise, as we helped people who are at very vulnerable times in their lives. They are often disconnected from the near and known as they try to connect to the far and often foreign. And yes, these objectives included the measurable targets such as growing revenues, keeping expenses
flat, increasing customer service, and ultimately getting us back on a profitable basis. For us to accomplish any of this, we needed to draw on lots of sources of inspiration. The idea I wanted to communicate was that we could draw inspiration and ideas not just from the biggest and most obvious places but from the small or obscure places as well.

HOW HAVE YOU TRIED TO MAKE POS BECOME PART OF THE CULTURE OF YOUR COMPANY?

Like most companies, we do client surveys where 5 is outstanding and 1 is negative. We have always obsessed over the scores of 1, 2 and 3 and tried to get rid of those. To change our culture we tried something different. We decided to look at the scores of 4 and 5 and figure out why we were outstanding. We wanted to study outstanding successes — why we were great as opposed to failing — and extend the lessons to other areas. We want to know how to be a 5 company — how to define it, how to measure it, and how to replicate it. I happened to be in France three or four weeks ago. I was talking about positive principles with our French employees, and they were struggling a little bit. I asked, “So how do we get to be 5s?” They kind of looked at me very quizzically. I wondered if it was a language translation problem. Should I have said it in French? They responded: “No, we don’t even measure anything north of 3.” So I asked: “How do you know when you’re outstanding?” It was a completely new idea to them. They said: “We don’t.” Then I asked them to try something. “Tell me when you have been outstanding. Tell me when you’ve seen our organization at its best.” One person stood up and said, “Well I’ve seen our employees at our best, and I’ve seen us be a 5, just today. We have had people at the Charles De Gaulle Airport 24/7 for the last week greeting relocated employees who are coming back after being forced to evacuate Japan after the earthquake and tsunami.” We are a relocation company, so we helped these people move there. She said, “They had to leave all their goods behind them. They have no place to live. They are being forced back into this country. We were there greeting them at the airport, helping them find a place to live, giving them bottled water as they get off the plane, helping them get back into France as quickly as we can. No other company is doing that. We are the only ones out there doing it on behalf of our clients.” And I said, “That’s it. You’re a 5. You’re helping people when they’re the most vulnerable in their lives. That’s to be celebrated. It’s positively deviant and so different than everybody else.” My job not only in France, but also throughout the whole firm is just to make sure people have the vision and the tools, and then I get the heck out of the way because they’ll do it. It is important to try to create a culture that not only allows but also encourages positive deviance. We were fortunate to later win the 2010 JD Power Award for Service in our Real Estate Franchise business and three “Trippel Survey” awards for outstanding client service in our Relocation Company.

WHAT A FUN EXAMPLE OF CELEBRATING SUCCESS!

Yes, but here is the really interesting in part of the story. When I had first laid out this challenge to the employees, one gentleman lingered behind. He said, “Jim, when you talked about drawing inspiration from the smallest not the largest and you used New Zealand as an example, I thought it was fabulous. I’m from New Zealand. And, when you used rugby as an example of being the best and being the toughest, you really peaked my interest because I used to play rugby for the All New Zealand University Team. And, when you talked about the Maori people, I was down right tingly because I’m Maori. And then when you laid out the Haka challenge, I was astounded because I used to teach the Haka in New Zealand. Would you like me to be your coach?” Now, I never would have thought that I was going to find a Haka coach that worked in our company in Scottsdale, Arizona, but there he was. All I needed to do was ask. I have found that when I ask others to genuinely help us become outrageously, positively deviant, you never know where help will come from, but it always comes.

CAN YOU PROVIDE AN EXAMPLE OF HOW YOU DREW ON SMALL SOURCES OF INSPIRATION?

Sure. One good example was the “Haka Challenge.” The Haka is a traditional Maori dance performed by New Zealand’s All Blacks rugby team before each match. The idea is to intimidate and scare the opponent. The Haka represents the toughness needed to win at rugby. I said, “If we accomplish our business objectives and you help me accomplish my personal objectives, I will stand in front of you and perform the Haka. This will be a celebration of our achievements and recognize the fact that we’ve stopped intimidating each other and started scaring the competition.” Well, sure enough, we went from a $70 million loss to a $20 million profit, and we actually achieved two times our expected business plan. We doubled our profits from what we’d expected. Our employee satisfaction scores went up in nine out of twelve categories. I had been hoping for eight out of twelve, but we got nine out of twelve. I got 110 written pages of comments in our EOS survey; 60 were about the positive changes in our company and, yes, 50 were about those changes we still needed to make. This year our scores continued to improve, and we are now approaching first quartile status in our survey results, the first time in years. After our earnings were made public, we had a barbeque for all of our employees out in the parking lot. Seventeen members of the senior management team and I all performed the Haka. It was a fun day to celebrate the hard work of so many of our associates. My only regret is I wish I were a better dancer!
and wow them. Don’t ask me what it means to wow a client. Ask the client. Make it positively deviant, way out there on the curve. We can’t do it for all 500 of our clients yet, so let’s start with five. Third, I want you to find five clients that, quite frankly, we’re just not doing well with. It just isn’t working, and it’s sucking up all the energy in our company. I give you permission to fire them. We’re going to stop merely counting clients, and instead, we’re going to have clients who count.”

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “WOWING” CLIENTS?

Well, we gave the “Gang of 30” the charge to find five clients and to wow them. We told the clients that they had been selected as one of our wow clients and that we really want to work on being positively deviant. We explained what we meant by our wow client program and why we selected them. We asked them to join us in this effort. It was amazing. One of the clients we selected for the wow program was so dissatisfied with us they were ready to leave for one of our competitors. That client went from being ready to walk out the door to being our biggest advocate. Why? We engaged them. We talked about what’s really important to them. We listened to what they meant as opposed to what they said. It was not easy to do, but we tried a variety of approaches. When an idea worked, we did more. When it didn’t work, we just put it aside and tried something else. We also had to get rid of the clients who were constant sources of negative energy. Every company has them. Every firm has clients who just exude negative energy. We got rid of those clients allowing us to channel our energy back to those where we had the chance to be successful. What is fascinating is that those negative clients are sucking up the energy at one of my competitors as we speak. Good luck with that.

CAN YOU PROVIDE AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT YOU DID WITH CLIENTS TO “WOW” THEM?

Basically, it’s how we try to encourage outrageously positive behavior in a very genuine way. About 18 months ago, I was visiting our London operations meeting with a variety of clients. British Petroleum (BP) is one of our clients in Europe, not a client here in the United States. I met with some of their HR folks and introduced myself as the new CEO. I talked about POS and how we were trying to change the culture of our company. I said that we wanted to engage them and learn from them. It was a great meeting. Then, about three or four weeks later, the Deep Water Horizon oil spill occurred with the unfortunate loss of a dozen or so lives and one of the largest environmental spills in history. You could read and see on TV that the folks at BP were being blasted in the U.S. and throughout the global press regarding their reaction times, what they were doing, what they were not doing, and so forth. The folks at BP were feeling pretty bad about all this.

So I called up the senior HR person whom I knew, and I said, “Listen, I can see what’s going on in the States. I’m sorry that this is happening for you. I understand you’re trying to move a lot of people into the Gulf area to deal with this crisis. I know you have vendors there probably helping you, but we are a relocation company. I would like to offer the services of our company to you, free of charge, for the duration of the crisis.” He said, “Why would you make such an offer?” “The very simple answer is that we all have a responsibility for what’s going on in the Gulf. We all need to try to help in ways large and small. This is the best way that I can think of to help you. It’s a sincere offer. If you’d like to take us up on it, great, if you don’t, that’s fine. I certainly understand.” About two days later I got a call back from the folks at BP. They said, “Well, first off, thank you so much for calling. There have been a number of vendors that we currently do business with throughout the world. Many have called offering their services. You were the only one that offered to do it free of charge. We probably won’t take you up on the offer, but we very much appreciate the gesture.” I said, “That’s fine. If you change your mind, we’re happy to do whatever we can to help. Again we’re all responsible here, and we just want to be helpful.” Well, sure enough, about six months later they decided to go out for an RFP (a request for a proposal) for a new vendor for relocation. We were invited to be one of the participants. Of course, the end of the story is not yet written. We don’t know how it will turn out. But, we use this example with our associates to encourage them to be positively outrageous. It’s okay to help others and not expect anything in return. When we do that, fabulous things can happen.

HOW DID YOU ROLL OUT POS TO THE REST OF THE ORGANIZATION?

As we started to introduce POS into our organization, we began with the “Gang of 30.” But we knew we needed to get the message out to our 1,300 employees in seven countries representing 30-plus cultures. We knew we needed some help. So, we identified a set of positively energizing and positively deviant people. They were not the most senior or experienced people, but they were people who provided a real uplift to the organization. We selected 26 of them from across the world and brought them into Scottsdale. For some of these folks it was their first trip to the United States. For some it was their first business trip. We had Kim come in to give them an introduction to POS. I talked about how we wanted to change the company, and I told them that I needed their help. They were very excited by the challenge. I charged them to introduce POS to 90 percent of our associates worldwide in 60 days, so that at least 1,100 people had a working knowledge of POS in 60 days. That meant members of the change team had to understand what POS is and have the ability to teach it to others. For some of them, you would have thought that I was asking them to put a man on the moon. The first question was, ”What does working knowledge mean?” And I said, ”It’s to be introduced to the POS perspective, have participated in at least one exercise, and be able to explain what POS is to others.” Then I said, ”Tell me what you need to accomplish the challenge. I’m going to leave the room, and I’ll come back in a couple of hours. Work with Kim. Tell me what you need to accomplish this.”

And so I left the room. I came back a couple of hours later, and they said, ”Okay, Jim, we’re willing to take on the challenge, but here are four things we need from you. One, we need you to help get us support from our managers.” I said, ”That’s done.” ”Two, would you mind making a video
that would introduce POS so that people know it’s important to you?” I said, “Perfect.” “Three, we want to form our own on-line community to share best practices and keep our group together.” I said, “Done.” “Four, we’d like to get back together so we can see this as an ongoing effort, not just a one-time change effort.” And I said, “Fine. I’ll agree to that.” Within 60 days they had accomplished not 90 percent, but about 93 percent. Our employee opinion scores went up in 9 out of 10 categories. The team is still working together. They did another session for everybody that fall. They were able to introduce more POS concepts — which in this case was the competing values framework — and it was even more well-received than the initial introduction to POS. The team introduced that material even faster into our organization. They have now created their own self-sustaining effort in continuing to bring the principles of POS into our organization. It’s been fabulous to see.

SO, HOW EXACTLY DO YOU FIND THESE POSITIVE DEVIANTS IN PRERS?

We asked our senior leaders to select the folks in their areas that they are happy to be around, that are not always looking at the downside but look at the positive side, that positively energize others. Did we get all 26 absolutely right? Nope. There were a couple, in hindsight, that we might not have asked. But the group became self-policing. After the first year they said, “Jim, we think it’s time for a couple of the folks to retire from the POS change team, and we want to bring in some new ones.” I said, “Okay, fine. Why don’t we put these folks on emeritus status so they’ll continue to feel a part of the process, but you don’t have to have them actively engaged. You can get some new, fresh ideas.” Indeed, that’s just what we did. We agreed that we’d have about a third of the group roll off every year and about a third would come on, so every three years the whole team would have turned over in terms of positive change agents. The advantage is that leaders are seeing these folks, early in their careers, making a difference in the whole company. They were getting a fair bit of attention from their managers, which is not a bad thing.

DID EVERYONE GET ON BOARD? DID YOU GET 100 PERCENT AGREEMENT TO ADOPT A POS PERSPECTIVE?

My own experience is about 50 to 60 percent of the people, if you’re lucky, will get it pretty much out of the box. About 20 to 30 percent of the folks kind of sit on the sideline and say, “Is this just Jim’s management thing du jour?” About ten percent of the people will positively reject everything that I talk about. They will just say, “It doesn’t make any sense. Sorry, it’s not working for me.” And that’s okay. I don’t argue with them. They will be out of alignment with where we’re trying to drive the organization, and they should go to a place where they will be in alignment. I quickly encourage them to go there. I’ve done a lot of recruiting of both senior and middle level executives into our company in the last 18 months, and people want to join a positively oriented company, even if you’re asking them to accept the same or less pay. The younger the person is, the more true it is.

SO, HOW HAVE YOU APPLIED POS IN YOUR FAMILY AND HOME LIFE?

I have two fabulous daughters, and my youngest daughter came home a couple of years ago with, well, let’s just say her report card was mixed. She was doing very well in some subjects but not so well in others. I happened to be on a business trip when the report card came in. My wife had said, “Wait until your father comes home. He’s going to talk to you about this.” My youngest daughter’s name is Mary Rose. When I came home, I said, “Mary Rose, I got your report card,” and her head kind of sagged. I said, “I see you got an A in English.” Her head picked back up, and she said, “Yea, I did.” I said, “Well, let’s talk about it.” And she said, “What do you mean, talk about it?” And I said, “Well, I’d like to talk about your A. Did you like your teacher?” She said, “Yea, I liked my teacher.” “Did you do your homework on time?” “Yes, I did my homework.” “Did you participate in class?” “Yes, I participated in class.” “If you didn’t understand something, did you ask a question?” “Yea, I did all those things, dad.” I said, “Well, Mary Rose, look at the results you got. You got an A. You know how to be an A student.”

Then I said, “I do want to talk about your math score.” Her head goes back down. “That grade wasn’t very good.” And she said, “Well, what do you want to talk about?” I said, “Did you like your teacher?” “No, I thought he was a jerk.” “Did you pass in your homework?” “Not always.” “Did you participate in class?” “No, I really didn’t understand it all.” “Did you ask questions when you didn’t understand?” “No, I was too afraid to.” I said, “Well Mary, you know those things you were doing for English? Let’s just try those four or five basic things in math.” I said, “Now, you and I are going to sit down every Friday, and we’re going to review how you’re doing. I’m not asking you to like your teacher, but I’m asking you to respect him. You’ve got to do your homework on time. You got to participate. If you don’t understand the material, you have to ask the question to get help. All the things you’re doing in English, I want you to try them in math. Will you try that with me?” She said, “Yea, okay I’ll give it a try.” Six months later you know where her math score was? A.

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