

# What I Learned from Tom Severino

by Kent Sterling

June 4, 2013



This Saturday, June 8th, friends and family of Tom Severino will walk together in his memory at Butler University in the [2013 Fight for Air Walk](#). Money will be raised, stories will be shared, and the memory of an outstanding boss, mentor, friend, dad, and husband will be celebrated.

Tom died of lung cancer almost four years ago, and so the Fight for Air Walk is an appropriate spot for those who remember Tom fondly to gather. While cancer robbed us of Tom's daily presence, it did nothing to dull the lessons he shared.

I worked for Tom for 15 years, and learned a concept for living from him that has helped me live a more productive and logical life.

Tom was a logical man who knew how to evaluate results and solve problems in a simple and incredibly effective way. He laughed loudly, led surely, and welcomed all.

The primary lesson from Tom that informs virtually everything I do came in his method for boiling down the complicated to make it simple. Solving complicated problems in life and career can be messy, but like math, if you reduce them to their essence, the route to the best outcome becomes obvious.

Showing people how that's done is leadership, and Tom's ability to keep it simple has helped me do the same thing.

I'll give you three great examples of Tom's genius:

My son Ryan was nine and in his first year of youth baseball. My Dad always coached me, so I thought it would be a good idea to coach his team. Toward the end of the season, I had no feel whether I was doing a good job for the kids.

My Dad taught me that winning wasn't meaningful as a metric for success in coaching kids, and there might even be an inverse correlation, so I had that down. Everyone played equally, and in the positions where the kids were best able to succeed. We finished 7-7 (despite having four kids who went on to play varsity high school baseball), and I was unsure whether I was making it rewarding enough for the kids.

The parents were a screwy group, minus a few gems, and they had no problem voicing their concerns, which was a dynamic I never remembered Dad being confronted with. Tom coached all of his kids when they were young, so I thought he might have some insight. I walked into Tom's office, and asked how I could tell whether I was doing a good job.

He said, "That's easy. See how many play next year. A lot play, you were great. A few play, you sucked." He smiled, and I left.

Simple. Concise. Brilliant.

Every challenge since, I have tried to boil the result down to the one result that is most meaningful. There was a sign in the Indiana Basketball locker room that read, "Don't complicate winning." Tom's message was always, "Don't complicate anything."

There was a meeting one morning in the fourth floor conference room at Emmis Communications in Indianapolis where Tom convened all the department heads. No one knew what was going to happen, and as always, we were on time because Tom didn't do late.

Tom walked in and said, "I like all of you, but I love my family." Uh-oh. That was the kindest and simplest way I've ever heard to convey how managerial decisions are made. That was basically the end of the meeting – 10 words. We went back to our offices knowing that we needed to find a way to increase revenue or we were going to go before Tom was held culpable.

When Tom hired me to program 1070 the Fan, we had a problem with the automation that repeated a couple of times. Tom brought me in and said, "This isn't an automation problem anymore. When a mistake repeats, the manager owns it. This is now a Kent problem."

That was a quick and easy way to communicate that poor performance should be addressed immediately, or it attaches to the manager. He also made it clear that the problem wouldn't become his.

The three minutes that meeting took clearly communicated our relationship. No thinly veiled threats. No double talk. No apologies. Just a "manage your people, or I'll manage you the hell out of this building."

Separating personal from professional was easy for Tom, and that might be the toughest part of management.

Through his honesty, brevity, and decency, Tom taught us how to manage. If he had written a book on management, it would have been one page, and the message would have been profound.

I'll summarize it here – define winning, bring together the right people to reach the goal, provide the tools needed, and celebrate the victory. Repeat.

Simple, concise, and brilliant – just like Tom.

[It took me 799 words to communicate three things I learned from Tom. He would have gotten it done in 35.]

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## 6 thoughts on “What I Learned from Tom Severino”

1. [Eddie White](#)[June 4, 2013 at 12:09 pm](#)

That was AWESOME! Brilliantly written! GREAT subject. GREAT writing!

2. [CK](#)[June 4, 2013 at 12:24 pm](#)

Kent, thanks for reminding me to remember Tom. Hard to believe it has been 4 years. I coached in a league for our daughters with him and he always made it fun.

3. [Julie](#)[June 4, 2013 at 5:02 pm](#)

Ok...now now Kent...you are bringing tears to my eyes. He was an incredible boss and friend wasn't he? I miss him. We will celebrate him on Saturday!!!! Nicely done Kent...he would have loved it!

4. [mike](#)[June 4, 2013 at 5:08 pm](#)

So Kent, how many kids came back out the following season? My guess is all of them. I would let you coach my kids.

1. [John](#)[June 4, 2013 at 5:30 pm](#)

Know what I liked about Tom? He treated me like I was an important part of Emmis even though I did 2 hours a week. That meant something...

5. Claudette June 4, 2013 at 9:37 pm

Kent,

Thank you for doing this! One thing that I will always remember Tom for is the wonderful relationship that he had with his family. His family not only included Linda and his kids. It also included us and everyone that crossed his path. He was always giving and sharing, and of course being the best practical joker in the world and the most optimistic person you ever met, and he believed in living life to its fullest. I am so glad that he hired me waaaaay back when! Ok that's enough, I'm beginning to sound like Kent!

From <http://kentsterling.com/2013/06/04/what-i-learned-from-tom-severino/>

Retrieved January 14, 2023