

The Power of Expectation and Environment

by Bill Strickland

It was a winter morning in 1996, and I was standing center stage in the pit of an old, wood-paneled lecture hall at Harvard University. Rows of wooden seats loomed above me in curving tiers. In those seats, with their expectant gazes bearing down on me, sat sixty or seventy razor-sharp young men and women—graduate students at the Harvard Business School—waiting to see what I had to offer. As a result of my work with inner-city kids and adults at the Manchester Bidwell Center in Pittsburgh, I had been asked to serve as an HBS case study, to share a little hard-earned business savvy from the other side of the tracks.

To tell the truth, I wasn't so sure that they could get what I had to offer. After all, I don't run an airline or an entertainment empire. If you wanted to be technical about it, you could say I'm not a businessman at all. As the founder and CEO of Manchester Bidwell, a community arts education and job training center in Pittsburgh, my mission is to turn people's lives around. We do that by offering them two distinct educational programs under the same roof. The first program, which we call the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, offers rigorous after-school courses in the arts that light a creative fire in at-risk kids and inspire them to stay in school. Classes at the Craftsmen's Guild are taught by a staff of established artists and skilled instructors, and the curriculum is designed to rival courses taught at the best private schools and academies. Our center also houses the Bidwell Training Center, which provides state-of-the-art job training programs intended to give poor and otherwise disadvantaged adults the skills and direction they need to land meaningful, well-paying jobs that provide the foundation for a much brighter future. We greet them all with the same basic recipe for success: high standards, stiff challenges, a chance to develop unexplored talents, and a message that many of them haven't heard before—that no matter how difficult the circumstances of their lives may be; no matter how many bad assumptions they've made about their chances in life; no matter how well they've been taught

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to reign in their dreams and narrow their aspirations; they have the right and the potential to live rich and satisfying lives.

As a guy who never forgot where he came from—and who knows firsthand how the realities of race and circumstance, of poverty and lowered expectations, can crush human dreams—I was certainly amazed when Jim Heskitt at Harvard got interested in our work. He was intrigued with the news of our success and with the unconventional methods we use, and he thought his students might learn something from the way I operate. The truth is, I never set out to be a corporate executive or to run any kind of operation at all. When I started out, all I wanted was to give some kids a chance to work with clay.

I was nineteen-years-old in 1968, when I founded the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, the tiny neighborhood arts center that grew into Manchester Bidwell. Our first home was a derelict row house on Buena Vista Street in Manchester. My plan was to use the space as a studio where I could teach neighborhood kids to make bowls and pots. I was a neophyte potter myself at the time, and making pottery was one of the great joys of my life. I liked the way the wet clay felt in my hands. Working with clay calmed me and excited me all at the same time. There was a sense of control, but also one of rich possibility. And there was a deep sense of accomplishment and pride once you developed some skill at it. The magic I felt when I first laid my hands on wet clay gave me the belief that I could do something interesting with my life. It opened up doors to meaning and possibility that showed me, for the first time, that I had talents and capabilities no one had seen before, and that I had never dreamed of. I’m convinced that those insights not only gave me visions of my future, but literally saved my life.

Thirty-four years later, the center and I are both still growing, but in a much larger and more sophisticated facility. Today, Manchester Bidwell comprises three separate buildings, covering 163,000 square feet, with 150 people on staff and as many as 1,100 students passing through our doors each year. Running such a complex organization requires a pretty high level of organizational expertise, and today I feel very comfortable wearing the hat of CEO. But I’ll never forget that Manchester Bidwell wasn’t crafted out of corporate

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vision or business savvy. It happened because a clueless nineteen-year-old trusted his unspoken intuition that the human spirit is remarkably resilient, and that even in damaged and disadvantaged lives, and in circumstances where the odds seem hopelessly stacked against you, there is endless potential waiting to be freed. What I wanted those Harvard grad students to understand—what I want everyone to embrace—are the simple principles that have guided my life and enabled my success: that students have the potential to make their dreams come true; and that one of the greatest obstacles blocking them from realizing that potential is that they believe, or are told, that the things they want most passionately are impractical, unrealistic, or somehow beyond their reach.

Harnessing these passions and interests in a warm, nurturing environment is key to helping students discover their potential. People, after all, are a function of their environment. Put bars on the window and they'll act like prisoners. Give them sunshine and fresh-cut flowers and respect, and they'll act like the citizens we expect them to be. Why fresh-cut flowers? Because it sends the message that life is happening at Manchester Bidwell, and that we care enough about each other to make the extra effort to bring the best of the outside inside our walls. (They also look really nice.) This philosophy extends to the food we serve in our cafeteria. We don't do fast food; we serve real food with real ingredients. We want our students to be able to use their minds to the best of their abilities, and providing the proper fuel is the way to make this happen. The way that we have been able to do these things is by partnering with community businesses and entrepreneurs. Once you begin with one of these folks, you create a domino effect, with other folks also wanting to participate, or showing more willingness to when asked. They realize that their businesses are not separate from the community, but actually dependent upon them. Reaching young people is the key to making the future of their communities, and consequently their businesses, brighter. They realize the stake they have in a community's greatest resource: its young.

All of us—no matter who our parents are, where we live, how much education we have, or what kinds of connections, abilities, and opportunities life may have offered us—have the potential to shape our lives in ways that will bring

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us the meaning, purpose, and success we long for. And you, as teachers, are in an especially privileged position in that respect. That's the essential lesson of my life: that we all can achieve the "impossible" in our lives. I want people everywhere to rethink their assumptions about what is and isn't possible in their lives, and to convince themselves that they not only have the right, but also the responsibility—and the capacity—to dream big, and to make those dreams come true.

About the Writer

Bill Strickland is CEO of Manchester Bidwell, a community arts education and training center. At Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, he offers programs in ceramics, photography, and painting to hundreds of kids a year, ninety percent of whom get high school diplomas and enroll in college. As a result of his work, Strickland has received a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, has been profiled three times in the Harvard Business Review, has lectured at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and has served on the board of the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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