

Excerpt reprinted from:

WALK
THE
WALK
THE #1 RULE FOR
REAL LEADERS



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The Fourth Element of Belief is that leaders must get their people to believe in themselves – to expect that they can and will accomplish a profound and positive change. In many ways this is the hardest challenge of all. I've found that it's best accomplished by a certain kind of role modeling: before people believe in themselves, they need to see other people just like them who've overcome the same obstacles and achieved the same change.

This is one of the powerful ideas behind an extraordinary program called the Delancey Street Foundation, which takes heroin-addicted and alcoholic felons out of the state prison system and has them live together in a waterfront complex in San Francisco that looks like an expensive condominium rather than a halfway house or rehab center. The site has five hundred residents, and only one of them isn't a former addict or ex-con: she's the program's cofounder, Mimi Silbert, a tiny sixty-seven-year-old grandmother who holds doctorates in both psychology and criminology. While the established wisdom in her field claimed that prison inmates were typically "psychopaths" who had no empathy for other people and were incapable of changing, Silbert believed that they could learn to live without drugs, alcohol, threats, or violence, and then reenter the mainstream society as peaceful, prosperous citizens. She has shown this belief by living among them – she's been a resident at Delancey Street for thirty-eight years, ever since she started the program in 1971, and she raised her two sons there among the former pimps and prostitutes and gang members and drug lords. She made herself vulnerable to some of society's most violent and lawless members in the belief that they could live together like a family. In my two decades as a reporter, I've never seen a more inspiring example of walking the walk.

Although Silbert knows that addicts and felons are capable of fundamental change, the addicts and felons don't start out believing it. Not at all. They come to Delancey because judges offer the program as an alternative to yet another prison sentence. At first, many of these repeat offenders see Delancey as a "get out of jail free" pass. Thinking with a criminal's mentality, they view Delancey as a scam that they're shrewdly exploiting. Instead of submitting to prison guards or parole officers who love to "kick their butts," they're scheming to get away with "one more con" by taking advantage of San Francisco liberals who like to "kiss their butts." They don't go to Delancey believing or expecting that they can change how they have always lived. Deborah, for example, was a heroin addict at twelve and a street prostitute at thirteen. She dropped out of the ninth grade. Her baby drowned in the bathtub while she was getting her heroin fix. She spent five years in prison. She went through many programs and hospitals, playing what she called "the cure game," but she knew that she would always be an addict. She tried to kill herself three times. Then, "to beat a prison case," she went to Delancey.

The new residents at Delancey have long believed that the only way for people like themselves to become powerful and prosperous is by dealing illegal drugs, so some convince themselves that Delancey must be a scam, an elaborate cover for a drug operation. Deborah stayed at Delancey because she believed "there must be something 'dirty' going on," and she wanted to get in on the action. Of course there's nothing dirty going on. Instead the newcomers see the longer-time residents who have lived there without drugs, alcohol, threats, or violence while they're working in the businesses that Delancey Street runs to support itself: a house-moving service, a waterfront restaurant, a bookstore-café, a Christmas tree sales operation, and a print shop. Instead of profiting as gang leaders or drug dealers, they're helping to bring in millions of dollars in revenues as managers of the moving business or as chefs and servers at the restaurant. And ultimately the newcomers begin to think that they, too, can be like Delancey's veterans. Their disbelief turns into belief and then into a hard work needed to make the change. When they've seen people just like them walking the walk, they know that they can walk it, too.

Delancey Street has a powerful, self-perpetuating culture, but it only came about because of the extraordinary work of a leader who embraced the Four Elements of Belief.

“To get the culture started, you have to believe in it, live it, show it, be part of it,” Mimi Silbert once told me. “You have to be willing to jump in a hole with people. The leader has to be willing to do it with people. ‘Change’ was a verb and it should stay a verb. It has to happen in action. You have to do it. I don’t think a leader can accomplish major change without being willing to slice yourself open and become part of the change.”

In my view Mimi Silbert and Wendy Kopp both point toward the wisest and most concise formulations of what leadership is all about. While “change” is a verb, “lead” is a verb, too. You have to do it. And while “teaching is leadership,” as Kopp says, the reverse is equally true: “Leadership is teaching.” That’s the essence of how leaders act.

Praise for
WALK THE WALK

“I always say that ‘change’ is a verb. It has to happen *in action*. You have to *do it*. That’s the terrific lesson of *Walk the Walk*. This inspiring book looks at real leaders who’ve made themselves part of the change—and the extraordinary results they’ve achieved.”
—MIMI SILBERT, CEO, Delancey Street Foundation