

Professional Narrative

How I got to be who I am, and why it matters

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Table of Contents

The Foundation	2
Building Up	3
The Teacher Who Never Left.....	4
Turning Led into Gold	5
Leading Forward	6

The Foundation

Every career has mentors, whether we recognize them at the time or not. Looking back, I can trace much of who I became to two people who probably never imagined the influence they would have on my life.

One was my high school math teacher, Mr. Smith. The other was my mother, a waitress.

At first glance, they had nothing in common. One taught equations. The other served meals.

Yet together, they taught me the two lessons that would shape every step of my career: how to help people learn, and how to make people feel valued.

Mr. Smith was our math teacher. There was computer was up by his desk, and I was allowed to work on it during lunch and when I had completed my homework. He was a gentle soul. I never heard him scream or yell. He guided. He showed us how and why things worked. When I had an issue with my self-teaching on the computer, he guided me. He never showed me the fix. He helped me put the principles of how to solve a math problem into solving my computer problem. He was not loud, he was there. Guiding, helping. Almost blending into the background when not needed.

Looking back, I realize I wasn't just learning BASIC programming. I was learning how to teach. Every onboarding guide I've written, every coworker I've mentored, and every user I've helped without making them feel foolish carries a little of Mr. Smith with it.

My mother was so much more than a waitress. She got to know her customers. She listened to them. She remembered them. She called them by name after several visits. She cared. Taking a food order was so much more than a job for her. It was showing love. It was showing people she cared and they mattered. She was respectful. She joked with her customers. You barely ever saw the bottom of your coffee cup, no matter how busy she was.

She probably never imagined she'd be teaching customer service. But every time I listen before troubleshooting, remember someone's name, or try to leave a person feeling better than when they called, I'm drawing from lessons I first watched across a restaurant counter.

Years later, when I found Information Technology, I realized I hadn't chosen a profession so much as found the place where those two lessons belonged together.

Building Up

When I entered college, I thought I was going to become a teacher.

I enjoyed explaining ideas, helping others understand difficult concepts, and watching someone gain confidence when something finally clicked. Somewhere along the way, I realized computers weren't pulling me in a different direction. They were opening new ways to solve problems and help people.

While working at Radio Shack, I learned that what people asked for and what they actually needed were often two different things. The best conversations didn't begin with recommending a product. They began with a simple question: "What are you trying to accomplish?"

Technology was opening new ways to solve problems, teach, and help people. I realized I could combine everything I enjoyed into one career. I dropped education from my computer science major and assumed I had left teaching behind. I hadn't.

Over the years I discovered that every role I enjoyed most had one thing in common. It wasn't the servers I built, the networks I managed, or the systems I deployed. It was the people. I found myself writing documentation instead of answering the same question twice. I looked for ways to simplify complicated processes. I enjoyed mentoring coworkers, helping new employees find their footing, and designing technology around the way people actually worked instead of expecting people to adapt to technology.

Eventually I realized I hadn't abandoned teaching at all. I had simply found a different classroom.

Today, whether I'm leading an enterprise migration, improving an onboarding process, or helping someone at the help desk, I approach every challenge with the same belief: technology is at its best when it helps people succeed. Systems matter. Processes matter. But people come first. When we understand how people work, learn, and communicate, we can build technology that removes obstacles instead of creating them.

That philosophy has shaped every stage of my career. It explains why I've been drawn to operational improvement, documentation, mentoring, and service leadership. It also explains why the projects I'm proudest of aren't remembered because the technology was impressive—they're remembered because the technology quietly disappeared into the background, allowing people to do their jobs with confidence.

The Teacher Who Never Left

When I entered college, I was certain I wanted to become a teacher.

I wasn't drawn to the profession because I wanted to stand at the front of a classroom. I was drawn to the moment when confusion became understanding. There was something deeply satisfying about helping another person discover that they were capable of more than they believed.

Life had other plans. As computers became a larger part of everyday life, I found myself fascinated by technology. It challenged me in ways I hadn't expected, and before long my career had taken a different direction.

For years, I believed I had left teaching behind. I was wrong. It happened so gradually that I almost missed it. Whenever I learned something new, I wanted to explain it to someone else. When systems became complicated, I wrote documentation. When new employees arrived, I built guides to help them succeed. When coworkers struggled with unfamiliar technology, I sat beside them until it made sense. When teams adopted new processes, I looked for ways to remove the uncertainty before it became frustration.

I wasn't trying to become the office trainer. I was simply doing what had always come naturally. Eventually I understood that teaching isn't defined by a classroom.

Teaching is helping someone move from uncertainty to confidence.

Sometimes that happens with a whiteboard. Sometimes it happens through a conversation. Sometimes it happens through a well-written document, an automated process, or a system designed so well that people never need to ask for help in the first place.

The tools changed. The purpose never did. Looking back, I can see that every project I am most proud of shares the same goal. The onboarding guide wasn't really about documentation. It was about helping someone feel confident on their first day. Standardizing computer builds wasn't really about efficiency. It was about giving every employee the same reliable starting point. The phone migration wasn't really about replacing hardware. It was about allowing people to begin Monday morning without wondering what had changed. Even the knowledge bases, training sessions, and community education classes all point toward the same idea.

Technology was never the destination. Helping people succeed was.

Turning Led into Gold

The measure of a leader isn't how many people depend on them. It's how many people leave more confident than when they arrived.

The leaders who frustrate me are the micro-managers. The ones who sit there, second guessing everything you do. Asking you every few hours what you are working on, what you are doing. Not because they need something, but because they don't trust you to do your job without their oversight. Asking you to come up with a plan when they already have one themselves that they are going to do, regardless of what you propose. The ones who constantly criticize you and find no good in what you do. To put into one word "Demotivators".

The ones who really inspire me are those who give me a task and expect me to complete it without them standing over me. They will ask for progress reports on a routine basis, every week or so. They watch, they listen, and help guide you if you start to go astray. They will gently remind you of the deadlines and expected outcomes. They will challenge your assumptions, not to prove you wrong, but to make sure that you truly agree with what you are saying and not just saying it to make them happy.

And, sometimes, just throwing in a little, and unexpected, thank you.

At no point do I feel I looked back behind me and said, "I have followers". They have people they rely on. They have people who help them, lift them up (But not too high), keep them grounded. They have people who are not afraid to call them to the carpet if they are headed down the wrong path, but also willing to walk with them down said path if it is the only one available, looking for a better route along the way.

And when I retire, I hope those who worked with me can look back and say, "He trusted me. He helped me grow. He never put me down. He lead with grace and taught with gentleness."

If I accomplish that, I will feel like it is a life well lived. Like I left things just a bit better than I found them.

Leading Forward

When I began my career, I thought success meant knowing the answers. Today, I believe success means helping others find them.

Somewhere along the way, my role changed. I stopped measuring my work by the systems I maintained and started measuring it by the people I helped become more confident. Technology is still what I work with every day. It simply isn't why I do what I do.

Over the years I've come to realize that my job isn't simply to keep technology running. Reliable systems matter, but they are only valuable when they allow people to do their work without frustration. My responsibility is to remove obstacles, answer questions, teach when I can, and leave people better equipped than they were before they asked for help.

When someone comes to me with a problem, I don't just want to solve today's issue. I want to help them understand why it happened and how to approach it the next time. If they encounter that same problem six months from now, I hope they remember the lesson instead of feeling like they have to start over. Technology should be a tool that helps people do their jobs, not another obstacle standing in their way.

That wasn't always how I looked at my work.

When I was twenty-five, I loved new technology simply because it was new. I wanted to experiment with it, push it to its limits, and be among the first to understand it. Over time, though, I realized that what excited me wasn't always what helped everyone else. The newest solution isn't always the best solution.

Today I still enjoy learning new technology, but my perspective has changed. I test new ideas on my own first. I work through the rough edges and learn where they succeed and where they fail before introducing them to others. Stability, reliability, and usability matter more than being first. My goal isn't to put the newest technology in front of people. My goal is to put the right technology in front of them, at the right time, in a way that helps them succeed.

What I enjoy most, though, isn't the technology itself. It's watching someone have that "light bulb" moment.

One experience has stayed with me through the years. A user came into the office carrying a week-old laptop with a cracked screen. They looked defeated, almost as if they expected me to be angry or disappointed. I looked at the laptop, smiled, and said with as much sarcasm as I could manage, "Well...I've never done that." They laughed immediately. "That didn't sound very convincing," they replied.

As I prepared another laptop for them, we talked. I told them about the computers I had broken over the years, the screens I had cracked, the motherboards I had accidentally damaged, and all the mistakes that come with working around technology long enough.

By the time they walked out the door, they weren't thinking about a broken laptop anymore. They were smiling. The laptop mattered. Helping someone walk out feeling confident again mattered more.

Experiences like that have taught me that leadership isn't about always having the answers. It isn't about being the smartest person in the room. It isn't about making people dependent on you. It's about helping people become more confident than they were before they met you.

Throughout my career I've tried to document everything I learn. No organization should depend on one person remembering every answer. Documentation, training, and shared knowledge make an entire team stronger. Ironically, during my cancer treatments, I still received calls from coworkers asking for help. They knew I was away, but they also knew I had solved similar problems before. I walked them through what I could from memory.

Later I realized something important. People weren't calling because I had kept knowledge to myself. They were calling because they trusted my judgment.

That reinforced something I had believed for years. The goal isn't to become indispensable. The goal is to build systems, documentation, and people that continue to succeed whether I'm there or not. I've seen that happen in small but meaningful ways throughout my career.

At Girl Scouts River Valleys, I helped organize the technology used at summer camps. Every mobile hotspot was stored in a labeled container with its charger and a card containing the login information, including an easy to scan QR-Code. It wasn't complicated. It wasn't innovative. It simply made someone else's job easier.

Recently, my supervisor mentioned how much smoother camp preparation had been because everything was organized and ready to go. Moments like that remind me that good leadership often isn't found in large projects. It's found in dozens of small improvements that quietly remove frustration before anyone notices it.

I hope I've done the same at People Incorporated. As my contract comes to an end, I hope Ryan and Rich remember me as someone who didn't wait to be told where he could help. Someone who asked thoughtful questions, learned quickly, documented what he discovered, and looked for solutions to problems others had simply learned to live with. Most of all, I hope they remember someone who genuinely cared about helping both his teammates and the people they served.

Looking back, I realize my definition of leadership has changed. Leadership isn't about titles. It isn't about authority. It isn't about having followers. Leadership is leaving people more confident than they were before they met you.

If:

- the systems I build continue to help after I'm gone...
- the documentation I leave saves someone else from unnecessary frustration...
- a coworker tackles a difficult problem because I helped them believe they could...

Then I'll know I've done my job well.

For me, that has always been the real measure of success.

I entered college believing I wanted to become a teacher.

Looking back, I realize I never stopped.