

CHAPTER 1

Is Your Character Contagious?

“There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.”

— W. Clement Stone

A true leader’s attitude is, as they say, unshakeable. It’s contagious. When true leaders hear the word “problem,” they think “solution!” When they see or feel frustration, they immediately turn their thinking around to “opportunity!”

I have often been asked, “Does anything ever get you down?” My answer very quickly is “No, nothing.”

When I started eighth grade, I entered Mary Hill Junior Secondary School in Port Coquitlam—a suburb of Vancouver. There I met an amazing person—one who has had a lasting and profound impact on my outlook on life and the curve balls that sometimes get thrown at me.

I was a hockey player. I took everything about the game seriously, particularly my preparation to be the best I could be. I had to. I am no giant by any stretch, so to survive at an elite level for my age, I had to be faster and better skilled than the goliaths I found myself around on the ice. Therefore, to keep myself in peak shape, I joined the high school cross-country running team.

Each morning, I would show up at the school for an extra run at 7:00 a.m. I would enter a dark and very quiet school and make my way to the gym to get changed for my morning run. As I walked the deserted hallways and got closer to the gym, I would start to hear the thump, thump, thump of a basketball against the floor. It would get louder and louder as I approached. I could now hear the squeak of running shoes on the hardwood, more dribbling, and a ball hitting the backboard. As I opened the door, the gym would be dark except for one end where a grade 9 student named Terry would already be shooting baskets. He would stop, look over, and with an ear-to-ear smile, yell out, “Good morning!” And go back to shooting baskets.

It was bad enough that I was there, out of a warm bed two hours early for a run in the cold, wet mornings we get on the West Coast, but Terry lived two miles from school, so he ran to school each day carrying his books and basketball. Near as I could figure, he was getting up every day at 5 a.m. or earlier. And, he was still happy!

In class, he was the guy who always received good marks, and although a bit introverted, he laughed and joked around constantly, and he would be there to help you with homework if you needed it.

After school when my cross-country teammates and I would be heading out for our afternoon workout, he would be in the gym shooting baskets. After an hour or so of our coach putting us through various forms of torture, we would be dragging our butts back to the school for a shower and home. When we came into the gym, Terry would stop to ask us how the workout went. We would grumble something incomprehensible about how Coach Tinck was killing us. Terry would smile and tell us it was good for us. At 6 p.m., he would still be there, shooting hoops after our shower; we would be heading home.

Terry would join the basketball team in late fall. The basketball coach had a policy that if you showed up for every practice, you would dress for every game. You might not play, but you got to dress. My friend was not overly tall and he was skinny—I think there was more meat on a pencil. He was not the best of players so he spent that entire first season on the bench, handing out towels and water to the guys coming off the court. That never, ever discouraged him. He always had something good to say to every player who came back to the bench.

The next year, the same routine before and after school made Terry marginally better, so the basketball coach would put him in the game if the team were ahead on the scoreboard.

The year after that, Terry made the starting line-up. He was still not tall, but the hours and hours of hard work and perseverance were starting to pay-off. As a starting guard for the team, he had the same infectious, positive attitude that was unshakeable.

In the final year of high school, Terry was recognized as the top athlete in our school along with his best friend Doug Alward—the most revered acknowledgment among a hundred or so athletes in our school. Still, he was forever grateful and would always try to deflect the attention to others. He finished academically near the top of the class. He was someone who shaped my adolescence by giving me a positive outlook—no matter what came along.

Along came college. Terry decided to go to Simon Fraser University near Vancouver. He was a “walk-on” to the university’s basketball tryouts. Although he had finally put on some weight in muscle, he was not invited to the team because of his height. Surrounded by behemoths on full scholarships from across the country, Terry brought his daily work ethic and determination to every practice. At the end of the tryouts, he was designated as the Junior Varsity team’s starting shooting guard. An amazing feat considering the talent that surrounded him! I was so very proud of how he once again showed everyone that through a positive mental image and a tenacious drive, anything is possible.

At the end of his first season, Terry finally went to see the doctor about a nagging knee injury that just would not heal. The doctor ran some tests, took some x-rays, and sent him to a specialist. More tests. The final diagnosis sounded like a shot heard around our little world: Bone cancer. Within days, Terry was hospitalized to have his right leg amputated above the knee.

My friend, my inspiration, if you have not already guessed, was Terry Fox—now arguably one of Canada’s most famous citizens for what was to come next.

Our circle of athletic friends was crushed. This kind of event wasn’t supposed to happen to someone at age eighteen—let alone someone like Terry!

Photo 1:1 Terry Fox (1980)



The evening after Terry’s surgery to remove his leg, I was in his hospital room with a couple of my close friends and about twenty other friends and colleagues from school. It is a moment forever etched in my mind. The mood was somber. Teenage boys are short on words at the best of times, but this was....What could you say? “It’s okay, Terry; you will be all right.” What a bunch of crap, I thought. This isn’t happening! This is so

unfair! My head was pounding from all the screaming I was doing inside my thoughts. We all just stood there and stared at the floor, tears rolling down our cheeks.

Then, right on cue, Terry started to do what he had always done. He started talking about what was going on and how he was going to fight the cancer that temporarily sidelined him—how he had already talked to a guy at the university who played wheelchair basketball (a guy who turned out to be Rick Hansen—another very famous Canadian because of Terry’s inspiration). Terry had also read an article that afternoon in the magazine *Runner’s World* about a one-legged runner. Terry was doing it again. He was cheering us up, infecting us with his contagious positive attitude!

We left the hospital that evening with mixed emotions. I remember every bump in the road as we drove home. Surreal. One moment my eyes were filled with tears; the next, I was smiling in wonderment and disbelief. Here was the finest person and athlete I had ever met, struck down in his prime. “This sucks!” I thought. “It is so unfair!”

On the drive home and through the sleepless night, Terry never left my thoughts. He amazed me again and again.

Terry entered cancer treatment right away. Throughout the time he spent healing from losing his leg, including his enduring painful and debilitating chemotherapy, he remained positive and continued to inspire everyone around him. Then, in the midst of it all, he got a tutor so he could catch up on his studies and write the finals for his first year at college. Every day, the news about Terry that reached us left us stunned and amazed.

Sure he had bad days—but they were mostly brought on by people who felt sorry for him.

Soon Terry was out of the hospital, and he got fitted for a prosthetic leg. As he got stronger, he learned how to walk and very quickly he started experimenting with running. The artificial legs of the late 1970s were not meant for running so he had to develop an unusual “hop and step” style. He looked awkward, but just like Terry, he not only got the job done, but he got better and better at running.

Once again, he shocked us all by announcing one day that he was going to run across Canada and raise money for cancer research. And, once again, we thought he was crazy, but no one doubted he would do it.

After some frustrating attempts to get some corporate sponsorship, Terry and his best friend, Doug Alward, headed across the country to Newfoundland, and on a cold April 12th morning in 1980, he dipped his artificial leg into the Atlantic Ocean and started his run.

Early in Terry’s run, he attracted the very rare interested supporter. It was mostly, “You won’t believe this, but I just saw a one legged runner out on the highway!”

Seven days a week, Terry would average 42 kilometers (26 miles) per day (The equivalent of a full 26.2 marathon) in stages. That would be no small feat for a two legged, world-class runner, let alone a guy with one leg and a prosthetic that was not meant for running! Being a marathon runner myself, I know how tough it is. I cannot imagine doing it every single day!

Terry ran against all obstacles beyond his handicap along the way—passing cars that tried to run him off the road, lack of attention from the media, miserable weather, unbearable pain. Yet through it all, he kept going!

Once Terry crossed into the province of Ontario, people finally started to pay more attention. Terry became the viral darling of the country. The media woke up and started to cover him and his story in a big way. He started to receive a non-stop stream of invitations for appearances and meetings. Through it all, Terry kept up his average 42 kilometers a day and never refused an interview or appearance. I remember observing from afar on the West Coast how impossible his schedule seemed to be, but at the same time, thinking “That is so Terry.”

Terry pushed onward. As he passed the nation’s capital and then Toronto, his countrywide popularity became larger than life. He kept going. He battled through pain, blisters on his stump and on his good foot. He kept going.

Just as he was past the halfway point of his Marathon of Hope (as it became known), Terry ended a run early one morning, crawled into his bed in the back of his support van, and told Doug he needed to see a doctor. He had been battling severe pain, congestion, and coughing in his chest for close to a month, and on this day, he had no energy left in

his tank. The prognosis from the doctor and the hospital was that the cancer had come back and spread to his lungs.

Terry's run was over. He had run 3,339 miles in 143 days.

In true Terry Fox fashion, he made a tearful apology to everyone who had supported him and to the nation. He vowed that he would not give up the fight so he could return one day and finish the journey. It was a speech that ripped my heart out and the hearts of everyone watching.

Terry came home and began treatment again. It soon became evident that the treatment was not working. Terry became weaker and sicker.

The last time I saw Terry was two months before his death in April, 1981. A group of friends and I were together one night at a local watering hole enjoying a Friday night beer. Terry walked into the bar, and as if by some divine presence, the entire place went silent. Terry came over to our table, sat down, and ordered a beer. We were stunned. He had shriveled away to half of his former size. The cancer ravaging his body was clearly winning.

In true Terry Fox fashion, he started talking about life and what it meant to have lived the life he had. Soon we were all telling jokes and laughing. Right to the end, Terry's attitude was unshakeable. It was truly worth catching!

Terry's original vision for his Marathon of Hope was to raise the equivalent of one dollar from every Canadian to enable cancer research for a cure (about \$23 million). Today, there are Terry Fox runs annually in 60 countries around the world. To date, the legacy of Terry Fox has raised over \$550 million. Cancer research and cures have moved leaps and bounds ahead of where they were in 1980. The lung cancer that took Terry is treatable today because of the research his foundation has funded.

For me, I like to think of my attitude as unshakable. The lessons I acquired from Terry in the eight short years I knew him have served me beyond anything else I have ever learned. My positive, can-do attitude that I have fashioned after Terry's has enabled me to take on some of the toughest leadership challenges. I have learned to lead with vision, purpose, and optimism—to enable those around me to see solutions and opportunity instead of problems and hopelessness.

On really tough days, when it is dark and cold outside, and I am tired and just want to hit the "snooze alarm" five times, I think of Terry and I start to move. My feet hit the floor, and one step after another, I get back in the game. I hold my head up high and remember that I am a leader and people around me depend on me to do the right thing and be there for them.

Discover what gets you out of bed in the morning and get out there and be the world's best at what you do. If you need motivation, just Google "Terry Fox" and see for yourself what I was incredibly blessed to experience!

The cool part is that you can choose your attitude. You can choose to make your attitude unshakeable and contagious!

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

What gets you excited about what you do and keeps you doing it?

How are you going to ensure that you live a life by your design?

What makes you optimistic about the future?