

## **Building confidence without even knowing it**

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Before student leaders begin leading others, I ask them to pause and consider a single question.

*"Am I building this person, or am I breaking them?"*

Leadership always brings influence. Sometimes it comes with a badge or a title. Sometimes it simply comes because someone is watching us, listening to us or looking to us for guidance.

Whatever form it takes, leadership gives us the opportunity to shape another person's confidence, ambition and sense of possibility.

I have come to believe that every leader becomes, whether they realise it or not, a steward of other people's confidence. We hold it for only a short while, but every interaction leaves people either a little stronger or a little weaker than before.

That responsibility has stayed with me for many years, and I was reminded of it again recently while reflecting on a story that began more than thirty years ago.

In 1995, my brother was a teacher and bandmaster. He took the Benoni High School Pipe Band on tour to Scotland, where the students visited a rehearsal of the Shotts and Dykehead Caledonia Pipe Band, one of the world's great pipe bands.

For those young South Africans, these were musicians they had admired from afar. Walking into that rehearsal hall must have felt both exciting and intimidating.

At the end of the rehearsal, something unexpected happened. The Pipe Major invited the students onto the floor. The musicians handed over their own instruments, encouraged them to play, answered their questions and welcomed them into a world that had previously existed only in their imaginations.

Nobody had to do that. After a long rehearsal, they could simply have packed away their instruments and gone home. Instead, they gave their time, shared their knowledge and, perhaps most importantly, made a group of young people feel that they belonged.

At the time, they were probably just being generous. Looking back, I think they were doing something far more significant. They were quietly expanding what those students believed was possible.

A few days ago, I found myself speaking to that same Pipe Major. We spent nearly two hours discussing leadership, learning and the future development of pipe band leaders. During our conversation, I mentioned that visit in 1995. He immediately recognised many of the names of the students who had been part of that group. They had gone on to become internationally respected musicians and leaders within the pipe band world.

What he had never realised was that those accomplished adults had once been the teenagers standing in his rehearsal hall all those years ago.

Then he paused. You could almost see him joining the dots. What had been an ordinary evening for him had become part of someone else's story.

I came away from that conversation wondering how often this happens in education. How often do teachers, coaches, mentors and student leaders quietly influence another person's future without ever knowing it? How often does a conversation after class, a moment of encouragement, an invitation to participate or a decision to believe in someone change what that young person believes is possible?

The remarkable thing is that these moments rarely feel remarkable at the time. They are seldom planned as defining leadership moments. They don't appear on lesson plans or school reports. They are simply ordinary interactions between people. Yet those ordinary interactions are often where leadership is exercised most powerfully.

We sometimes imagine that influence comes from the positions we hold or the authority we have been given. Increasingly, I believe it comes from something much quieter. It comes from the opportunities we create. The encouragement we offer. The way we speak to people when they are still discovering who they are.

The choice to build rather than break.

Most educators will never know where those moments eventually lead. Years later, the learners sitting in today's classrooms will become teachers, entrepreneurs, parents, healthcare professionals, community leaders and colleagues. Much of what they achieve will be shaped by their own effort and determination.

But somewhere along the way, many will also remember the people who helped them believe they were capable of more than they had imagined.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest responsibilities of leadership. Not simply to achieve results. But to use whatever influence we have in ways that leave people stronger than we found them.