

Transforming a Community: 17 Things A Leader Can Do

By *LifeWay Leadership*
by **Brian Dodd**

Franklin County, MS has a population of 7,000 people. There are only two stoplights in entire county which is halfway covered by national forest. There is little economic opportunity. Not many people ever seem get out of Franklin County. In fact, the 2016 high school graduating class had only seven of its 93 students go on to a 4-year college. But then a leader arrived.



Their story was featured on *60 Minutes* this spring. Think of the movie *Hoosiers* but chess instead of basketball.

The following are 17 Things Leaders Can Do To Transform A Community:

1. **Generosity Levels The Playing Field.** It Gives People Hope And A Chance – In 2015, an anonymous benefactor lured Dr. Jeff Bullington, a chess teacher, to Franklin County from Memphis.
2. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Select A Leader With A Proven Track Record Of Performance** – Chess has existed for over 1,500 years. With 25 years' experience teaching the game, this benefactor saw Bullington use chess to change the lives of dozens of urban Memphis youth. He thought the same thing could happen in rural Mississippi.
3. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Value Its People** – People are the only appreciable asset a community has. Everything else depreciates. Bullington said regarding regarding the town seemingly tucked away in nowhere, "If there are people there it's not nowhere. It's somewhere. It's just somewhere that doesn't get a lot of attention."
4. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must See The Potential In Its People** – When asked about the children who did not attend the big city

schools, Bullington added, “They’re as smart as any other kids I ever met.” He also said, “Some kids have been underestimated or written off for reasons that are false.”

5. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Be Committed To The Community** – Bullington signed a 10-year contract.
6. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Engage The Community** – When the chess program started, expectations were for 12 kids would play chess. Today, they have approximately 200 involved.
7. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Overcome The Naysayers** – One of the students said, “People said country kids couldn’t learn chess...We showed ’em different.”
8. **To Change And Transform A Community You Will Face Significant Obstacles** – When the mostly elementary kids traveled to Starkville for the Mississippi State Championships, they were facing primarily high school kids.
9. **To Change And Transform A Community They Must See Progress** – Franklin County dominated the 2016 state championships.
10. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Help Them Accomplish More Than They Ever Dreamed Possible** – A 5th grade girl said, “Chess could take us anywhere. But it’s not about where it takes us but how far it takes us.” One of the players’ father added, “You always want to see you kids go further and chess is a vehicle that can take them there.”
11. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Improve The People’s Self-Image** – After winning the state championships, one student said, “Chess is like something I’m really good at for once.” He also responded when asked if the best chess player in the world could come from Franklin County, “Absolutely.”
12. **Changing And Transforming A Community Is A Struggle. But Struggle Is Necessary For Strength.** – After winning the 2016 state championship, they traveled to Nashville this past December where they would compete with over 1,500 players from 644 schools for the national championship. They lost 30 of their first 32 matches. Bullington observed, “It’s a real struggle and they have to learn to struggle at this level. And they’re learning they will have to struggle at a level they never have before...It’s a deep, agonistic experience. It’s real, true competition based upon skill alone.”

13. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Stay Committed To Your Core Principles** – After the initial shock of increased competition, Franklin County’s players settled down by remembering one of the team’s mantras – Let your opponent show you how they’d like to lose.
14. **To Change And Transform A Community You Must Celebrate Continual Improvement** – With two rounds to go, Franklin County gained momentum and were now hovering around the Top 10.
15. **Great Leaders Really Can Change And Transform A Communities** – Franklin County’s 5th graders finished 8th in the country. Their 6th graders also finished in the Top 10. This is two Top 10 national finishes after Bullington started the program only 18 months ago.
16. **Transformed Communities Are Grateful Communities** – One of the students touchingly said, “One thing that I don’t think I say enough is “Thank You’ or teaching us all of this.”
17. **Transformed Communities Become A Place Called Home** – Bullington closed out the interview by saying, “I don’t think of it as sticking it out (for the remaining eight years of his contract). I think of it as being at a place I like to be.”

Are you the type of leader who can change and transform a community?