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Do the Right Thing

An excerpt from *Live As A Leader: Tools and Inspiration to Transform Yourself, Your Team, and Your Life*, by Aleta Norris, Nancy Lewis and John Rutkiewicz, 2022

Bruce was reviewing shipments and customer order reports as his company wrapped up another quarter. It's going to be another weekend of overtime, he thought. Bruce is a plant manager in Tennessee for a large-scale manufacturing company with welders and skilled workers. They work twenty four hours a day over three shifts and then added extra weekend hours during any given month as needed. He knew this weekend was one of those times. Goodbye, weekend. Bruce knew this especially bothered his team when they had plans to watch football or barbeque. In the south, college football Saturdays are sacred. But what could be done? They had to meet their quota.

Then he received a call that no one wants to receive. Tragedy had struck. One of the plant's beloved employees, Junior, had just died in a motorcycle accident. Bruce rushed out to the scene, just to be there. He stopped thinking about their productivity. Some things are bigger than work.

Junior was the employee everyone wanted. He worked hard out in the shipping yard, often in 90- to 100-degree temperatures, always full on. He was not a time waster, not a wander-around kind of guy. He was friendly and helpful, likable and positive. As he walked out the door, moments before his motorcycle hit a pothole in the road, he said, "See you tomorrow, Boss! I'll bring the donuts!" His last words, most likely, ever spoken.

Bruce knew that this news would devastate his team. He learned that the visitation and funeral would be on Saturday— which was the day for mandatory overtime. In that moment, he knew there was only one thing to do. He gave the entire plant off on Friday and Saturday. Those who knew Junior had to have time to pay their respects and to grieve.

"At the time, it was just the right thing to do," Bruce remembered. "I thought I was going to be in trouble, but I didn't think of the ramifications of it. I reached out to my boss, and he supported me."

At the funeral, Bruce encountered Junior's father. "You shut down the plant for my son," he told Bruce, overcome with emotion.

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With this profound and simple statement, Junior's father illuminated the core of leadership: A regard for common humanity. Recognizing that people's needs matter. Doing the right thing at the right time. Acting from the best possible values.

Aleta Norris provides an ongoing column on developing better leadership skills. She is a leadership expert and Principal at Living as a Leader LLC.

