



Tom Davidson, founder and CEO of EverFI



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# This Cultural Value Is Worth Borrowing: "Stab in the Heart, Praise to the Back."

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*After interviewing hundreds of CEOs about their key leadership lessons and their thoughts on building a high-performing culture, I have heard a lot of cultural values. The most effective ones are black and white — either you are living them or not, and the specificity means people can call each other out in the moment. That's why the one in the headline above jumped out from my conversation with **Tom Davidson**, founder and CEO of **EverFi**. Guaranteed you'll learn a ton from our interview.*

**Q. Tell me about when you were a kid. What were you doing outside of class?**

A. I played a lot of sports and I did a ton of landscaping. I loved landscaping and I did it all the way up until after college as a side job. The thing that I loved most about it was that there was a beginning and end to every single project and it took different turns along the way. It was everything from cutting and grooming hedges to dragging clay tennis courts at a local club to cutting down trees. I loved the physical work, probably because I'm a small guy and it made me feel bigger than I am.

**Q. Tell me about your parents.**

A. My dad was a lawyer, and he worked for some very interesting folks in the oil and gas industry. I grew up in Amarillo, Tex., and Tulsa, Okla., and he worked for T. Boone Pickens and was his general counsel. My mom took care of the four of us, and she stayed home the entire time I was growing up. Growing up in Texas and Oklahoma

really defined a lot of how I think about the world.

**Q. How so?**

A. I loved the aggressiveness and the risk that seemed to be all around me growing up in Amarillo and then in Tulsa. These were people who, for multiple generations, had drilled holes into the ground and had won and lost many times over, sometimes everything. You saw cycles come in and out and watched people adjust to them.

I lived in the heart of the reddest part of America and then moved over time to all of the bluest parts of America. So I really hold those two things very much in my head. While I don't often agree with many things I see in the world, I understand them for the most part.

**Q. Other influences from your parents?**

A. The biggest thing was that my parents were very big about respecting work. My mom would always point out the art of how someone did their job. It was always described with this sense of awe. She believed that people deserved a ton of respect for work and for hard work, and she was always very specific about calling that out.

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They were also pretty direct, so I'm very comfortable having pretty direct conversations, but I spend a lot of time trying to instill a culture where people talk behind people's backs with praise and never talk behind people's backs with negativity. No one wants to go back to high school. So one of our values is "stab in the heart, praise to the back."

I've always believed that "work-life balance" is a false narrative because I think you should expect the same thing in all parts of your life. I say this to every single person when they start here — don't expect anything different here than you would expect from the people you love in your life. You want them to have your back, you want them to cheer you on, you want them to be straight up with you, you want to have tough conversations.

It's not always rosy. You want it to be real. Just because you darken the door of an office every day doesn't mean that you should put on some totally different hat in terms of what you expect from people and what they should expect from you.

**Q. What else do you tell people in that first-day speech when they join EverFi?**

A. We need crazy amounts of intensity and creativity. So there's no such thing as a bad meeting. There are useless meetings and there are

meetings that shouldn't have happened, but you should spend a lot of time making lemonade out of any interaction you have with someone. There's always something to learn if you've done your homework. Information is the superpower of a lot of this stuff, so doing your homework beforehand and knowing as much as you can about the person that you're sitting across from are all pretty big cultural things here.

Another is "always show up." It's surprising how many opportunities there are day-to-day when you can bail on something or not go to some event or meeting. I really do believe that showing up is very big. It gets you to second base in a lot of ways — in interactions, deals, and the way you show people how you roll.

**Q. You seem to have a lot of energy. Where does that come from?**

A. I've always had a lot of impatience, in a pretty good way, I think. Sometimes it makes me distracted, but I was always very goal-oriented. One of the sayings in our family for a long time was that you should never get too up and never get too down.

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It's definitely a governing principle of my life. We don't read our press

clippings and we don't get too excited when things are going really well because they'll be really bad at some point. If you yo-yoed yourself like that, it would be awful. The only thing that has to be consistent in all that is your attitude. Your energy has got to be a pretty flat line across those ups and downs.

**Q. Other leadership qualities that are particularly important to you?**

A. Delivery of your message matters. I've seen a lot of people who've been right 95 percent of the time on every point that they've made but could never figure out a way to convene people around that message. At the end of the day, that won't work. Storytelling and communication and optimism really need to be a part of it. No one wants to walk into a place for eight hours a day and work with Johnny Downer all the time. I don't need people to have bluebirds flying around their head, but I need people to feel optimistic and communicate optimism.

**Q. If you were speaking to a group of new college grads, what would you tell them?**

A. I spend a lot of time talking about the importance of diversity of information in your head. We really are the switchboard operators, and our job is to take in a lot of information and figure out how to distill that down and push that into the organization.

I tell people that at a time where we now have all the information in the world in our pocket, you don't have any excuse for being uninformed

in any meeting or in any place in the country. You should be able to talk about a wide range of things because you're going to meet people along the way who just have very diverse interests. It begins and ends with information, in a lot of ways.

Competence is also a really valued skill. It's not about being loud. It's not about being crazy aggressive. It's not about being mean or really nice. I gravitate internally here to the people who I know are competent, who will get something done really well with focus and not a lot of fanfare.

That's a skill you can develop. It's not like you're born just fully competent or incompetent. You can develop competence as a skill. Be known as somebody who gets stuff done and does it well and with diligence and rigor. I love people like that. They're my absolute favorite people to be around.