



**Keynote address by Gail Smyth, Executive Director, Skills Canada – Ontario,
delivered at SkillsUSA – NY Spring Conference on April 1st, 2009.**

You are probably wondering why I am standing here with a baseball mitt and ball in my hand and thinking why in the world would our speaker be bringing a mitt and ball to our Leadership Conference?

Doesn't she know that this isn't a baseball tournament?

Why indeed!

You probably thought I was going to speak to you about success and doing your best over the next two days! And I did think about talking about success by saying: "Success is when countless hours of training meet up with one moment of opportunity".

No, I brought the mitt and ball with me because I wanted to illustrate something to you and then ask you a question. After I ask you the question, I want you to pause for a moment and think about your answer.

PAUSE

Do you think if I gave you this baseball and this mitt that you would automatically become a great baseball player?

PAUSE

What do you think?
No, I don't think so either.

If only learning a new skill was that easy, then all of us would be great baseball players or great carpenters, or talented electricians or outstanding chefs. But that's simply not possible because it takes a lot more than receiving a gift of a baseball mitt and a ball to become a baseball player. Just like it takes more than having the right pots and pans and the right cooking ingredients in order to become a well-known chef.

I am always amazed by the chefs I see on television. How do they do that? Even when I use the same recipe that they use on television along with the exact ingredients that they use, my creation never seems to come out quite as perfect. For me, cooking is hard work but for the chefs I watch on television cooking seems to come with ease. No matter how hard I try to recreate their wonderful dishes, television Chefs always appear to have the right knack or the right skill of food preparation to master their creations to perfection.

So what does it take to become a great chef?

Certainly a keen interest in cooking would help. But it also takes believing in yourself, a desire to master the art of becoming a chef and lastly the ability to learn how to become a chef.

No matter what career you chose in life, you have to believe that something is possible even though belief is not a tangible object; you can't hold "belief" in your hand like I can hold this mitt and this ball in my hand. Having faith in yourself is to know that there is nothing more vital and important to you in this world than achieving your life's goal. This level of self-belief becomes an actual part of who you are and ultimately provides you with the path to success.

Conversely, those of us who do not make the most of our opportunities could ultimately get handed the worst jobs for a career! The truth is people often end up doing menial jobs because they are not qualified to do anything else. Your education is so important because it will empower you to take more control over your life. With the right education, it is easier for people to have the self-confidence necessary to make their opinions heard. Making the most of your education, making the most of your opportunities, such as this leadership conference, will mean being able to have choices. It will mean working in an interesting and well-rewarded environment.

Making the most of your education means being prepared to push and test yourself in every situation. It means not just listening when asked to but asking questions and enquiring about the reasons for things. It means using your initiative and not being satisfied with the minimum answers. It means being prepared to take on more challenging tasks and working for longer hours.

We are, each of us, individuals with our own agendas, ideas, neuroses and goals. We have our habits, our hobbies, our dislikes, our strengths and our weaknesses. Each of us has something essential and intrinsic that switches us on. That is the thing that drives us. It is the engine inside and the reason we get out of bed in the morning. It is our incentive to live, to breathe, to work and to play. Understanding this philosophy will be the key to your success and if you choose a career you love you will never have to work a day in your life.

You will be successful if you commit to your career. You will be successful if you commit to it with more passion than anybody else does. Don't just bring commitment to your career, bring enthusiasm, excitement and a positive attitude. A recent research study suggests that the number one skill employers are looking for in their employees is a positive attitude. Employers recognize that if someone has a positive attitude most likely they have the ability to learn anything.

I am not suggesting that maintaining a positive attitude is easy, especially when we seem to be constantly surrounded by negativity. It's easier to maintain a positive attitude if you always surround yourself with positive people

Now that we all have the right attitude, I want to remind you that a lack of commitment, a lack of passion and a lack of belief in your ability will be terminal to any career. If you don't believe in yourself and your own ability, then you will most likely always fail. We learn to be critical of ourselves as we learn to march to the drummer of others wants and needs; we learn to be critical of others when they do not conform to what we want or expect. Our best personal and professional selves come from a place of self love and acceptance. When we can truly accept ourselves, we can also see those in our world as collaborators on our path of personal learning.

It is one thing to be given the ingredients to make a gourmet meal but in order to become an outstanding chef you have to WANT to become an outstanding chef. You have to believe in yourself and know that you have what it takes to be a chef.

The baseball player didn't become a great baseball player as soon as he received the right equipment. He became a great baseball player because he had the tools he needed to succeed, but he also displayed the right attitude, he put in long hours of training, and he was ready when the right opportunity came knocking at his door.

I would like to teach you an exercise that I use to help me maintain a positive attitude even in difficult times. Could I ask you to please stand up?

Now I am going to ask you to repeat after me....

- I will think of myself as successful
- I will have positive expectations for everything I do!
- I will remind myself of past successes!
- I will not dwell on failure, I just will not repeat them!
- I will surround myself with positive people and ideas!
- I will keep trying until I achieve the results I want!

Thank you. Now you may now sit down.

So in closing, I have one more question for you:

Are you going to be ready when the right opportunity comes knocking on your door? With the right attitude, strong commitment and a belief in your own ability, I have no doubt that you will always be successful!

And lastly, "if you want to leave footprints in the sand, put on work boots".
Chief Clarence Louie, Osoyoos Band.