

“On it.”

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How could one community redefine my values? The statement “the world starts at 8 a.m.” begins to answer this question for me. That sentence echoed through my mind as I stood in the cold, on a rainy January morning. I wasn’t just standing there and I wasn’t alone. I was standing on SMU’s track along with 15 classmates, prepared to run a few miles. I didn’t know it then, but that moment would mark the beginning of one of the most transformative journey’s I’ve ever taken. All of the credit goes to a leadership and coaching class unlike anything I had ever expected.

It wasn’t just a class. It was a community. SMU’s Advanced Leadership and Coaching class, known as APSM 4300, was built on the back of the class founder’s list of 18 principles. These values didn’t stay on the page. They became a filter through which I saw my actions, my thoughts and my identity. I had always considered myself as “on it.” Organized, motivated and driven. I didn’t yet understand that being “on it” could also mean being trapped in an internal loop of blame, control or ego.

From the outside, this leadership and coaching course might have looked like a mix of personal development and light physical training. But to the students, it quickly become a place of unfiltered honesty and growth. We weren’t just classmates, we became teammates. Each of us had to show up fully in every activity. We were constantly asked to get uncomfortable. In those moments the community became alive.

This class was different. We weren’t just handed the founder’s 18 principles, we were expected to embody them. Not one student was there to get a grade. We were there to get real, to be challenged and to lift each other up. And because of that, I changed.

The shift began with three core ideas introduced in the first week:

1. The world starts at 8 a.m.
2. Expect the unexpected.
3. You can only control your actions and reactions.

Simple, but easier said than done.

The early morning trained me in discipline. The unpredictability of the coursework forced me to stay adaptable. But it was the emotional work, including conversations around values and especially the concept of being “on it,” that opened me up.

At first, I took pride in being “on it.” Every student in the class was an outstanding leader in various groups on campus, strong academic records and most importantly kind and willing to learn. I wanted to prove I should be there. I was the one with the schedule, the plan and the backup plan. But when we went over the founder’s principles #8 hit me, full stop. It reads: “Everything will work out just the way you want it or wanted it — if not, you’re ‘on it.’”

Suddenly, “on it” wasn’t something to strive for. It was something to become aware of. I had to ask myself: Am I trying to control this outcome because I’m afraid? Am I so attached to my expectations that I can’t accept what’s unfolding?

Each class began with a daily check-in. Each student got to go around the room and state what they were thinking and feeling. It allowed all of us to understand our mindsets at the start of the class and how we would attempt to be present. The answers varied. Some of mine included: I had a terrible night of sleep so I am here powering through. I have tests all week and my mind is preoccupied. I am eager to be here and be present. Each day my classmates’ answers allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of simply how we were doing.

One day I admitted I was trusted with a group project in another class. I felt I was doing all of the work and resenting my teammates for not pulling their weight.

That's when my professor said, "Maybe you're trying so hard to be right you're missing the opportunity to lead."

I was floored. And a little embarrassed. But I knew the truth in his statement. I was "on it." I was trying to control the outcome instead of letting go, collaborating and trusting the process.

Before this class, I valued control, productivity and perfection. But those values had sharp edges, that I didn't realize were cutting into my relationships and limited my growth. Through the semester I learned to shift from control to trust, from perfection to presence and from blame to ownership.

The next principle I was struck by was #17. It challenged me further. "You never stop thinking. Sharing what you think is fun. If people are irritated and react to what you say, listen carefully. They will tell you a lot about themselves. They're usually 'on it' and want to make you wrong. Recognizing you're 'on it' is the toughest thing to do."

I started to see conversations differently. Arguments became data. Looking at others or my own emotional reactions became insight. I stopped trying to "win" and started to trying to understand.

We were all works in progress. And because we had space to fail and be vulnerable, we began to reflect each other's growth. I remember one time I was hard on myself for missing another goal. I was expressing my concerns to a fellow student and snowballing my one missed goal into a complete disaster. She responded not with a pep talk or affirmation, but simply to say, "You're 'on it.' You're making yourself wrong so you don't have to feel this disappointment."

That hit hard. And of course, it was the absolute truth.

The course wasn't about becoming perfect leaders. It focused on becoming aware, present and responsible for how we show up. My classmates helped me see the areas where I was reactive, guarded or stuck. I did the same back to them. And together we encouraged each other to move through it with grace and honesty.

By the end of the semester, we weren't just talking about leadership, we were all living it. Each challenge, mental or physical, was an invitation to examine ourselves. When one student had a rough day, someone else carried the emotional weight.

Together we created a culture where accountability and compassion coexisted. I learned that leading doesn't mean having all the answers, it means asking the right questions and being willing to grow.

One day stands out. The day our professors had asked us to meet at SMU's aquatics center. We didn't know what to expect, but at this point in the semester, I'd learned to expect the unexpected.

The morning started with a lesson over our fears. How they show up, how they can paralyze us and how we can either control or retreat from them. Our instructors led us up the stairs to a 10-meter diving platform. Ten meters doesn't sound like much when you're sitting on the ground. But at the top, looking down, it looked like a cliff. My chest immediately tightened. I have a strong fear of heights. The kind that isn't uncomfortable, but completely consuming.

One by one, my classmates with ease took a step off the platform and plunged into the pool. Some were hesitant. Others whooped with excitement. But everyone did it. Except me. I stood frozen.

I stood there. No one mocked me. No one rolled their eyes or pressured me. My classmates, the community I had grown to trust, encouraged me. They didn't push me to go beyond what I could handle. They coached me to take a different approach. Try a lower platform instead.

I walked down to the 5-meter platform and stood there. Still afraid, but less alone. I jumped. It wasn't the 10-meter platform. But, it was something. I realized the importance of a true community.

A community cannot be fully formed until vulnerability and weakness shows. That's when the true shape of a group forms. It's easy to bond when everything is going well, when we are winning, achieving or laughing. But when fear grips someone or when one of us falters, that is the moment a community is tested. And that day, my community passed.

The leadership values we learned weren't about being stoic or invincible. They were about presence, honesty and effort.

The final principle from the founder's list is #18: "If you are unhappy about what's going on, fix it. If you won't fix it, get off it. You'll be happy."

I couldn't fix my fear in one moment. But I could take a step. I could get off the 10-meter platform and choose something different that still pushed me. And in doing so, I found a kind of happiness in effort and honesty in being supported.

Giving others the space to struggle, to not be perfect, and to be worthy of encouragement are now key values I use to evaluate the communities I am apart of.

Strength is something I always value, both in myself and in others. But this course pushed me to redefine what strength actually looks like. Vulnerability, I learned, is not weakness. It is the gateway to genuine connection. Real leadership starts when we stop acting "on it," as if we have everything all together.

This simple statement has changed the way I approach my problems. Now, when I find myself spiraling, I pause and ask; “Am I fixing this? Or am I just sitting in it?” Most of the time, I am “on it.” Constantly thinking, wishing things were different. But where does that get me. I’ve learned to either take action or let go.

It’s not easy. But it’s rewarding. You are giving yourself time back you would spend overanalyzing problems you have no intention of solving.

And this is where the community mattered most. Because every time I forgot a principle or got “on it,” someone was there to reflect it back to me. Never harshly, but with clarity. That accountability created real transformation. Feedback isn’t personal, it is a true gift when it comes from someone who shares your values.

Another unique aspect of the course is how the professors empowered the students. Having the students teach each other was a key part of our learning experience. We were all asked to bring in a photo that represented our values.

My classmates brought in photos of their childhood homes, family gatherings, cultural recipes and nature. I brought in a photo of a guitar pick with the words “These go to 11” engraved on it.

I explained to the class the impact this phrase had on me. My family and I were on a trip to Napa Valley, learning about the history of the various wines we were tasting. As I glanced around the table, my eyes landed on a small guitar pick that was lying on everyone’s place setting. When I read the phrase “These go to 11,” I was immediately curious. The vineyard owner explained it harks back to a phrase from the movie *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), where Nigel Tufnel, the lead guitarist of the band Spinal Tap, proudly showcases his amplifier with knobs that go up to eleven instead of the standard ten.

It symbolizes pushing boundaries, striving for excellence beyond what's expected. The phrase was meant to indicate the wines we were tasting were exceptional. They went to 11.

In that moment something clicked. I realized this was a perfect motto for my life. I wanted to strive each day to exceed expectation and become a stronger leader.

After sharing the phrase with the class, I realized pushing myself to an 11, looks different than when I began the class. This class challenged many of the values I thought were fixed. For a long time, I believed a good leader meant being polished and composed. I thought strength meant never showing doubt. But through this course, and the people in it, I saw the best leaders aren't the ones who have all the answers. They are the ones who ask good questions, who admit when they're struggling and who invite others to step into the moment with them.

The entire semester was a preparation for our toughest task yet: a week-long backpacking trip in Taos, New Mexico. Every physical and mental test was preparing us for the unexpected we were going to face. We packed our bags, piled into cars and began to drive to the start of the mountain trail. We all knew we were about to be tested, but we also knew we wouldn't be doing it alone.

From the moment we arrive, the terrain demanded our full attention. The hikes were long, steep and exhausting. We carried heavy packs on our backs and moved as a unit, making sure no one was left behind. The weather didn't hold back either. Some days it rained and when we reached the peak of our hike it snowed as we were setting up our tents. The wind whipped through our campsite and made lighting even the smallest fire a group effort. We ate dehydrated camping food and relied on layers to stay warm. And even though the ground was highly uncomfortable to sleep on, we were all drained. By the time the sun set, we more than happily put our heads down on inflatable pillows and immediately fell asleep.

It was the hardest physical challenge many of us had ever faced. Every day tested our stamina, our patience and our willingness to push through discomfort. But what I remember most from that week is not the struggle, it is the community. It is the way we huddled together under our rain coats during the storms, how we took turns filtering water from icy and muddy streams, and the endless conversations we had while walking side by side on winding trails. We encouraged each other and laughed together. The community we had built all semester was positive and uplifting. No matter the bleak conditions, our moods couldn't be broken. The blisters, bruises and cold nights were made bearable by the strength of the group.

This was the moment all those values we learned were put to the test: expecting the unexpected, taking ownership of our reactions, and recognizing when we were "on it." There were times when the cold wind was whipping my neck or when I was counting my steps until we got to the campsite, but there was always someone. Someone to provide encouragement, someone to adjust my pack, or share snacks with. We all had our moments and we all lifted each other up.

On our final night we had chosen our campsite of the night on a barren field, allowing for a strong wind to whip against us. Someone cracked a joke and soon we were all laughing, really laughing. In a way that made us forget, just for a moment, where we were and how hard the day had been. The laughter and the shared joy, was more warming than the fire itself. Community is not built on easy moments, but rather in adversity. And leadership, often happens in those quiet exchanges: offering a hand, listening without judgement or choosing to walk beside someone instead of ahead of them.



When we returned from Taos, we weren't the same group of students who had started the class months earlier. I walked away from the course with a clearer sense of myself and the comfort that I can pick up where I left off with each student in our community

The most profound part of the class wasn't just what I learned about leadership. It was what I learned about community. Before this course, I often thought community was something you find. A place you belong or a group you join. But this class taught me that community is something you build moment by moment, through trust vulnerability and shared effort. We were not just classmates. We laughed, cried, struggled and succeeded together. We learned each other's stories, strengths and sticking points. And through it all, we held space for each other to grow.

By the end of the semester, I noticed something had shifted. Not just in how I saw others, but in how I saw myself. I no longer felt the need to be perfect. I no longer measured my worth by what I could accomplish alone. Yes, I felt more confident. But, more than that I felt connected.

This experience revealed to me the community that has had the most profound impact on my values wasn't a club, a family or an organization. It was a class I showed up for twice a week. But, everyone who showed up was ready to be challenge and changed. It was in this space I understood what really matters to me: authentic, courage and compassion.

And in this space I redefined my values. I still believed in hard work and excellence. But, I also believed in rest. In asking for help. In creating room for others to shines. Leadership is less about being in front and more about being inside.

These values have left me a better leader and human.

I carry the belief we are all “on it” about something, and that is okay. What matters is that we recognize it, name it and decide how to move forward. What matters is we create space where others can do the same.

When I reflect on the question “Which community has made the most profound mark on your values?” I don’t hesitate. It’s this one. The community formed at a brisk 8 a.m., in swimming pools, long runs and within four walls of SMU’s Annett Caldwell Simmons Hall that fostered tough conversation and quiet encouragements. The community that wasn’t afraid to be real.

This course didn’t impact me because of the rigor of the course. The impact was created by how much the course asked of me. It asked me to examine my default reactions, to admit when I was stuck, to lead with presence instead of pressure. It serves as a constant reminder growth doesn’t come from always being right. It comes from being real.

This course didn’t just teach me how to lead others, it taught me how to lead myself. I look back to the cold, rainy January day I spent on SMU’s track. Huffing and puffing. I was terrified. I couldn’t run nearly as fast as anyone in my class. Part way through the run I had internal dialogue telling me to drop the course. My subconscious made me push through and stay in the class. This small decision is one of my greatest blessings.

This community is one I will cherish forever. One where we take risks with the encouragement of others surrounding us. Even if it is just to take one small jump off a lower platform. One where we can understand when we are “on it.”