

# Coach Koehr's Swimming Awards Banquet Talk

March 2, 2025

## Purposeful Leadership

### A. Introduction

- a. Connor is too young to remember **my wife's grandfather, Pops**
  - i. He died in the 1990s in his 90s
  - ii. Pops was a **wonderful old Irishman** who proved that the **fountain of youth flows with Schmitz beer and vodka**
- b. Pops used to say, "**Hard work ain't easy**"
  - i. I **never** actually **agreed with that**.
    - 1. No, **Hard Work is the easy part**
  - ii. **What's hard is being responsible**
    - 1. **What's hard is being the leader**
- c. And all of you are built for "hard"
  - i. Earlier this season, Meg Blanchette reminded me of a quote from Saint John Paul the Great:
    - 1. "***The world offers you comfort. But you were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness.***"
  - ii. Leadership is hard, but it is a calling for almost all of you
- d. This is a particularly **important topic for me**
  - i. So, I thought it might be useful to devote this year's talk to what I have learned about leadership during my time leading the Seton Swimming & Diving team.

### B. Reflecting on 25-Years

- a. I just finished my **25<sup>th</sup> year coaching at Seton**
  - i. 2 years as an assistant coach, and 23 years as the head coach
  - ii. When you get to my age, you start to **get more reflective about**
    - 1. The **people you've loved** and the people who have loved you
    - 2. The **things you've accomplished** and the ways you have failed
    - 3. The **joys of the good choices** you've made, and the pains from the bad choices you've made
    - 4. The **adversity you've faced** and the ways you have responded to it – or failed to respond to it
  - iii. One of the ways that you get more reflective is,
    - 1. you start to **move beyond the "who" and the "what"**
    - 2. to think about the **"why" and the "how"**
      - a. The **"why"** has certainly been the **source of great reflection** for me, particularly last summer as I faced

the prospect of a turning point in my life with Connor's upcoming graduation

i. But that is going to have to be another talk.

**b. Today, I want to focus on the "how"**

b. When I started coaching in 2000, we **already had a very successful team** by nearly any standard of the time

i. We had already won **11 Conference Championships**

ii. We were **regularly hosting multiple dual meets** each season using a **homegrown excel application** to score

1. Thank you, **Mrs. Seltman**

2. The state of the art at the time was for swimmers to get a **card from me** to bring to the blocks so timers could write the times on it and give it back to the swimmer to deliver to Mrs. Seltman

3. **Relay splits** required a manual stopwatch and someone far less ADD than me to capture them

iii. We had a **big team** compared to most others

1. **Seton** had just recently ramped up to **350 students**

2. Our team had **16 girls** and **13 boys**, many with last names you will likely recognize even today

a. Kaitlyn and Kelly **Koehr**

b. Stephanie **Seltman**

i. Charles Seltman's youngest daughter

c. Jennifer Planchak

**d. Kathleen Lytle**

i. Her brothers own The Bone in town

e. Casey Rafter

f. Will and John **Rogers**

i. As in Cat Rogers

**g. Bryan Morch**

i. A 7<sup>th</sup> grader on that famous 2006 medley relay

**h. Jack and Anna Murphy**

i. The portrait of The Chief in Corpus Christi was painted by Jack

i. And, of course, Katie **Shipko**

iv. We practiced in **5 lanes at Georgetown South**

1. An old summer meter-pool in a tough neighborhood that was covered over with a cinder block building

v. We had **three caring Coaches** led by Katie Shipko's mother, **Terri Shipko**

1. Plus, **Dan Flook and me**

2. The team President was **Joanne Pretz**

- vi. All **communication** utilized the relatively new technology of e-mail with a dial-up connection over your home phone line
  - 1. **“You’ve got mail!”**
- vii. And one stroke of genius by **Mr. Westhoff and Mr. Seltman**
  - 1. We were already a **separate 501©3 corporation**
- c. Think about **how far we’ve come** since those early days. We have developed a program:
  - i. That can encourage **135 kids of all ability levels** to participate
    - 1. And **725 unique kids** since 2000
  - ii. That can entice **92 volunteers** to commit so much time this season
    - 1. Including **21, all-volunteer, coaches**
    - 2. With several incredibly talented people with no children at Seton who have **come to us on their own** because they saw an opportunity to make a difference
  - iii. That can generate **1,114 Personal Records** in a single season, **each one a personal win** for a young man or woman
  - iv. That practices in 14-lanes at the premier aquatic center in our area
  - v. That **can host 207 swim meets**, mostly large invitationals, since 2000
    - 1. Including **75 large championship meets**, more than 50 of which were meets created by us
    - 2. **Utilizing so much technology** to capture, display, and disseminate individual and meet results.
    - 3. With a **livestream capability** that NCAA Conference Championship meets would be pleased to have
  - vi. That can host a high school swimming team website that gets more than **77,000 hits** per season
  - vii. That can win **949 regular season meets, 57 conference championships** and **ten (10) state championships** since 2002
  - viii. That can raise **\$110,000 for Cystic Fibrosis**, and
  - ix. That can be a **model for other schools** on how to improve their programs, and that can even **help multiple other schools create** a swimming program at all.
- d. As I reflect on my 25 years of Seton Swimming and Diving, I see something really unique and amazing in the world of high school swimming
  - i. It begs the question, **“How did we get here”**
  - ii. Well, there are many answers to the question
    - 1. Certainly, **the Holy Spirit was guiding us** the whole way, and we tried to stay as open as possible to the path that the Lord had laid before us.

2. And we certainly **can't answer without using the names of countless people** who have been uniquely instrumental in the development of our program over the years:
  - a. In the time leading up to my involvement
    - i. **Bill Shaw,**
    - ii. **Charles Seltman, and**
    - iii. **Joanne Pretz**
  - b. During the most formative times since I started
    - i. **Chris Cook**
    - ii. **Bill Dealey**
    - iii. **Rich Lowell**
    - iv. **Pat Mulhern and DD Ross**
  - c. And more recently,
    - i. **Ashley Keapproth**
    - ii. **Ross Palazzo**
    - iii. **Paul Fifield**
    - iv. **Mike and Anne Judge**
  - d. And **countless others**, many in this room, whose names I could spend the next 10 minutes reciting.
3. But the portion of the answer I want to focus on today is
  - a. **“Purposeful Leadership”**

### C. The Meaning of “Purposeful Leadership”

- a. The people that live in my house know how I feel about this, and I want all of you to know also:
  - i. **I don’t just think** you can be leaders in this world
  - ii. **I expect** you to be leaders in this world
- b. When you **pray** for God to **send someone** to make something better
  - i. You should **be open** to the idea that **he’s sending you**
    - 1. Maybe you are being called to answer someone else’s prayer
  - ii. And that is likely **going to require leadership**
- c. I can already **hear my wife** telling me that **some people are natural leaders** and some people aren’t
  - i. That is certainly true
  - ii. But that **doesn’t mean that everyone** in this room **cannot be a leader,**
    - 1. if that is your purpose
    - 2. You don’t have to be the CEO or Head Coach to lead
    - 3. Jesus wasn’t a CEO or head of anything in particular
- d. **Purposeful leadership**
  - i. Purposeful leadership as I hope to describe it **does not just apply to large organizations** like the Catholic church, large businesses, sovereign governments or the military.
    - 1. It **applies to group of people**
      - a. Schools
      - b. Clubs and associations
      - c. Boy Scout and Trail Life Troops
      - d. High school swimming & diving teams
      - e. Groups of friends going annually to Notre Dame football games
    - 2. It even applies to the **most fundamental unit** in our society
      - a. The domestic church
      - b. The family
  - ii. All of these **require leadership to achieve their ultimate purpose**
    - 1. Which I why I often **apply the adjective “purposeful”** when I use the word “leadership”
    - 2. Leadership is **not an accident**
      - a. **Some of it comes naturally**, that is true
      - b. But the **“purposeful” part does not**
        - i. It **requires**
          - 1. a **consciousness of that purpose**, and
          - 2. the **application of principles** that can be applied by anyone

- a. from the Bishop of a Diocese,
  - b. to the CEO of a company,
  - c. to the leadership at a school,
  - d. to the leaders of a Trail Life Troop,
  - e. to the coach of a swimming team,
  - f. to the father of a family.
- e. So, I'd like to spend the rest of my time **talking about some of the most important things I have learned** about "Purposeful Leadership" over the past 25 years
- i. My hope is that all of you, young and old alike, **will see opportunities in your lives to apply** some of these principles as you seek to
    - 1. **Follow God's plan, and Help others follow it too**

## D. Culture is King

- a. The most **important pre-requisite** to strong leadership is the **establishment of a strong culture**.
  - i. At the **root of the word culture** is the word “**cult**”
  - ii. So, “culture” is **the manifestation of what we value** and what we believe in
    1. Or, extending the “**cult**” **metaphor**, it is what we “**worship**”.
- b. **Three points** about the strongest cultures:
  - i. First, the strongest **cultures develop within a context**
    1. For instance, **American culture developed within the context of our history**, particularly
      - a. A **revolution** in defense of **individual liberties**,
      - b. the **principles of government** established by our founders, and
      - c. **patterns of immigration**
    2. **Seton Swimming & Diving culture has developed within the context of Seton School**
      - a. It would be **very difficult** for our **team to develop** the way it has **if we were disconnected** from the **culture of the school**.
      - b. Seton’s culture is **certainly Catholic**, but there are plenty of **Catholic schools that don’t share** our culture
        - i. The Seton culture has also **grown** out of a:
          1. **Founder** who relied on **her faith and hard work** rather than a lot of **outside professional help**, and
          2. A base of families **from homeschool communities**
            - a. Also comfortable with **relying on faith and hard work** rather than **outside professional help**
        - ii. It is entirely **normal to see parents** teaching in a classroom at Seton
          1. **Some are actual professional** teachers with all the right certifications, but
          2. Many are **not professional** teachers.
            - a. I’m fond of saying that **Alan Greenspan** couldn’t teach economics in a public school, but

- b. At Seton, a guy with **no education certifications at all can teach Pre-Calculus** and find pretty good success doing it
- 3. This **context has made so many things possible** that even the best leader would struggle to do in a different context
  - a. Image **attracting parents with no swimming experience** to be coaches for instance?
    - i. We had 21 of them!
  - b. We have **13 stroke & turn judges** who volunteered to learn the rules in detail
    - i. **Very few are parents of USA swimmers** or have more experience with swimming than their kids on a summer swim team.
  - c. **Other schools** in our conference **can't seem to get even one**
    - i. Even **much larger catholic schools** like Oakcrest and John Paul the Great who have much larger student populations than us.
    - ii. Because **their cultures**, which try to be Catholic like ours, **rely on paid professionals** that keep parents on the periphery
  - d. **At Seton, parents are at the center.**
    - i. The **primary educators** of their children
    - ii. So, **it follows** that they are the primary people **running the athletics programs** at the school too.
- ii. **Secondly, Culture needs to be purposeful too**
  - 1. Its why companies try to articulate their **Mission and Vision Statements and their Values**
    - a. They are trying to **communicate what is important**,
      - i. What should be “worshipped” in the root sense of “cult”
  - 2. We have **done the same thing with our GEMS**
    - a. Our GEMS were my **attempt to combine**
      - i. The **foundational teachings of our Catholic faith**,
      - ii. The **culture that Mrs. Carroll has created** at the school as a whole, and
      - iii. The **competitive nature of our enterprise**
    - b. To articulate what was important to us

- c. It is important to note that **the word “swimming” or “fast” is not used at all.**
  - i. Sure, **swimming fast feels important** to us, but it is the really just the **natural byproduct** of what **actually is important to us.**
  - ii. If we live our GEMS, swimming fast takes care of itself because

**1. *Swimming ain’t about swimming***

- 3. It is the **very counter-intuitive key to our culture that must be purposefully communicated** because it would be so easy to focus on the obvious fact that we are a **swimming and diving team.**
- iii. And **Finally, Culture needs to be lived by the leaders**
  - 1. All of us in leadership positions need to **repeatedly reference and model our GEMS**
  - 2. We model our **Gratitude** by trying to be joyful
    - a. I know I fail often
    - b. **Thomas Aquinas** defines Joy as “**the conscious possession of the good**”.
      - i. There can be a lot of good in my life that I am not conscious of, so I **don't have joy if I don't** frequently take a moment to **reflect on all of it.**
  - c. It reminds me of a **story my son Patrick**, a father of three (3) young boys, sent me:
    - i. Imagine it's a Sunday morning.*
    - ii. You've been allowed to sleep in as long as you want, and*
    - iii. You have no chores or responsibilities for the day.*
    - iv. There's fresh fallen snow on the ground.*
    - v. Your Mom makes Cinnamin rolls and serves you breakfast.*
    - vi. But you are almost 3, so you are blind with rage.*
- d. **“Who has it better than us?”**
  - i. Kids yell: “Nobody!”
  - ii. That is **purposeful culture in action**

- e. And it **leads to action**
  - i. For any of you who are stroke & turn judges or regular timers, have **you ever had a Seton kid say thank you** on deck?
  - ii. I bet you have.
- 3. We model **Excellence** by always trying to get better ourselves
  - a. On the fireplace in the “Man Room” of my house, I have a sign with a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln
    - i. **“Whatever you are, be a good one.”**
    - ii. I love that quote, but
      - 1. If I could go back in time to see Abraham Lincoln, **I think I would suggest a small revision:**
      - iii. **“Whatever you are, be a better one.”**
  - b. We **model excellence by continually getting better ourselves.** For instance,
    - i. In 2002, when **Ray Bennett** went 23.48 in 50 Free, or
      - 1. or in 2010 when **Cat Rogers** split 24.50 in the 200 Free Relay at States,
      - 2. **Both very fast times** for their day
    - ii. **I didn’t know about “Effective Freestyle”.**
      - 1. I had to learn that
    - iii. **How much faster was that 200 Free Relay** because we continually improved ourselves as coaches?
  - c. Many of you don’t know this, but our team has a **subscription to GoSwim** where every coach, even Ross Palazzo, gets a daily e-mail with a video on stroke technique.
  - d. For you seniors or you parents who have been around for a while,
    - i. **Are our meets run better than they were 6 years ago?**
  - e. If you ever been on the other end of a phone call from **Mr. Fifield** that starts with **“I was thinking .....**”, then you know what I mean by **someone who is always trying to top** what he’s done before.
  - f. That is **purposeful culture in action**
- 4. We model **Meekness** by being Meek ourselves

- a. Are we ***“helping our opponents over the bar that we have raised by winning?”***
  - b. I hate to lose,
    - i. Just ask my wife
  - c. But does that keep me from **writing in my blogs about the great swims from our opponents?**
    - i. If you read my blogs regularly, you probably **know many of the names of the Trinity Christian girls**
    - ii. **When they read their names** used in flattering terms on the opposing coach’s website, **how do you think they feel?**
  - d. I’ve **helped start or run teams** from four (4) schools not called Seton
    - i. What **message does it send** to our organization to watch me coach the Trinity Meadowview boys relay on how to beat my own Seton relay?
  - e. That is purposeful culture in action.
5. We model **Sacrifice** by giving of ourselves without the hope for any material reward.
- a. **Saint Pope John Paul the Great** calls it the **Law of the Gift**:
    - i. Responsible self-giving, not self-assertion, is the road to human fulfillment*
    - ii. Wojtyla's favorite lines from Vatican II says, "Man finds himself only by making himself a sincere gift to others" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 24).*
    - iii. Radical personal autonomy is not the key to happiness.*
      - 1. The key to happiness is total self-giving.*
  - b. Riding my Harley in West Virginia on no particular time schedule, being home at no particular time,
    - i. is NOT the key to happiness
    - ii. although it sure sounds like it some days.
  - c. It’s why it is so important to our culture to use volunteers.
  - d. That is **purposeful culture in action**.

## E. A Framework for Leadership in Action

- a. **Once you have nurtured a culture, the ground is fertile to lead**
- b. **How do you purposefully apply the culture** to an organization and get the most out of it
  - i. **How do you maximize the results** for the organization, and most importantly, **the people in the organization?**
- c. I consciously use a **simple four-part framework** that, if properly applied, **will get people to follow you anywhere**
  - i. **Including to the cold waters** of the Freedom Center at 6:04 a.m.
- d. **People will follow** you anywhere
  - If they know that you **love them**,
  - If they feel a **part of something bigger** than themselves,
  - If they feel like they are **personally getting better**, and
  - If they feel like they are **winning**
- e. **They know that you love them**
  - i. **Lead for the benefit of others, not yourself.**
    1. Rule #1 is always to ***Make Other People Successful.***
    2. Imagine that in each person you lead is the Christ.
  - ii. It's why:
    1. We use an **all-volunteer labor force**
    2. We **don't make cuts**
      - a. We take people of all ability levels
    3. We **meet kids and families where they are**
      - a. **Some are deeply committed athletes**, and some **are participating** in an organized sport for **the very first time** in their lives
      - b. The **demands** you put on kids at those extremes **need to be different**
      - c. Yes, it is super-frustrating for me when kids don't show up and don't tell me, but I'm slowly, very slowly, learning to handle that better too.
    4. I write a **weekly blog**
      - a. I'm not sure there are many things I do to **demonstrate my love for you** every week than spending most of the day Sunday **writing a 5,000-word research paper** about you and your accomplishments.
    5. And it is why I'm **not afraid to confront you on deck** when you are not living up to the expectations of our GEMS.
      - a. Believe me, **it would be much easier just to ignore you.**

- f. **They feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves**
  - i. **Shared values, a shared mission, and a shared tradition** are vital to a **sense of belonging**.
  - ii. It's why **we constantly celebrate our tradition**
    1. Coach Mike Stott, introduced me to **Coach Don Heirdary** in Oakland, CA about who he also writes in SwimmingWorld Magazine
      - a. Coach Heirdary has a saying that ***“Tradition Never Graduates”***
      - b. I like that.
    2. One way you **foster tradition by celebrating your past heroes**
      - a. I recall being at my son **Daniel's graduation ceremony from Army Engineering School** at Ft. Leonard Wood in central Missouri
        - i. I don't remember what the commanding officer said, but **I do remember what he didn't say**
        - ii. He **didn't tell me a single story about a hero** who was an Army Engineer.
          1. Not a single story about a person worthy of emulation
          2. Not single story about the inspiring accomplishments of Army Engineers throughout history
        - iii. And as a result, **I found it to be incredibly uninspiring**
        - iv. I **vowed not to make that same mistake**
    3. That's **why we have:**
      - a. An **All-Time Greatest Swims YouTube Channel**
      - b. A 10-foot-high **record board** in the Seton gym
      - c. An **All-Time Top-20 fastest times list**
      - d. An **annual Homecoming Meet**
      - e. **Countless stories told** in my blogs and on the livestream and in informal settings about the Seton greats of the past
  - iii. The desire to have **kids feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves is why** I care so much about
    1. **Uniforms** on deck
    2. The way we run our **Meet warm-up sessions**
    3. How we **line up for the National Anthem**
    4. The team is **not just about you**

- a. You are **part of something bigger that can make you bigger too**
- iv. And its **why we have such a big team**
  1. I had a great conversation with my son, **Coach Kevin Koehr**.
    - a. Kevin was **talking about the legacy of every member of our team**.
  2. Insightfully, he told me, ***“Nothing that happened this season could have happened without the people who went before.***
    - a. ***For every person you don’t remember their name, someone accomplished something great because of them.***
    - b. ***Even the people that never scored a point contributed to the team that has become Seton Swim & Dive today***
    - c. ***If the whole team was Group 1, we wouldn’t even have the Group 1 we have.***
      - i. ***A lot of members of this team might not even be on team without the encouragement of someone else on the team***
      - ii. ***And then they encouraged someone else to live up to our GEMS.”***
  - d. I remember when a very young **Cora Kramer** finished the Cystic Fibrosis Swim-a-thon.
    - i. I’m sure that have helped **Jack Gregory** and **Addi Hadro** finish it.
      1. It **became “normal”** for everyone on the team to be able to do it, even from Group 6.
  - e. I wonder if **Meg Blanchette** would have swum again had **Molly Bauer**, **Orla Haggerty**, and **Walter Saffian** not swum again also.
    - i. And that **would have been a shame**, because I never would have heard **Meg remind me that I was not built for comfort**

- v. **They feel like they are personally getting better**
  - 1. **Excellence is not about *good*; it is about *better*.**
    - a. **Start by making people better technically** and
      - i. **move to making them better people,**
      - ii. **capable of leadership** also.
    - b. **Set the example** by continuously improving yourself.
    - c. ***“Excellence is very attractive”***
  - 2. **It’s why:**
    - a. We **focus on stroke technique** over conditioning
      - i. We know that the fastest way to make a high school swimmer faster is to do the stroke right
      - ii. And the results can be very swift
    - b. We **meticulously measure Personal Records**
    - c. We make **everyone swim the 500 Free** and encourage everyone to participate in the **Cystic Fibrosis Swim-a-thon**
      - i. It is very enlightening for a young person to discover the **fundamental truth** that ***you can always do more than you think you can do***
    - d. We try to get kids to **swim all eight (8) events**
    - e. We have developed the **infrastructure to host** all our own meets
      - i. So, **everyone has a chance to demonstrate improvement** every week
- vi. **They feel like they are winning**
  - 1. Anyone who has ever run in a military formation knows that it is **easier to run from the front.**
    - a. **Celebrate victories.**
  - 2. It’s why:
    - a. We have created so many **opportunities to excel**
      - i. You have **two (2) or more chances to get a Personal Record every week**, and that can be a big win in a young person’s life, I know
    - b. We **created so many big championship meets** with **traveling trophies:**
      - i. **NoVa Catholics**
      - ii. **VISAA JV Invitational Championship**
      - iii. **VISAA Division II Invitational Championship**
      - iv. I can’t even describe the **joy that I felt** when we **had our team and coaches all jump into**

**the pool** after we won both the boys and girls at the JV Invitational

1. **How many JV competitions** in the history of high school sports have **elicited that sort of excitement?**
2. We won!
- c. I **write about victories**, both in and out of the pool, **in my blogs**
3. It even **applies to the adults** that work as volunteers
  - a. **I love to let you run!**
    - i. And run you have!
    - ii. The best of you figured out a long time ago that **you aren't waiting for me** to tell you what to do
  - b. I know **I feel like I'm winning here**, and
    - i. **I want you to share that feeling with me**
    - ii. By knowing that you are in control of your area of responsibility
      1. You can win too!