



# "10 Leadership Lessons Learned from My Immigrant Armenian Parents"

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I am an Armenian immigrant and migrated here from Beirut, Lebanon with my family when I was two years old. My family included my father, mother and two older brothers. Back in the early 1960's there was much unrest in my birthplace prompting my parents to want to provide safety and more opportunity for their children. They were fortunate to have sponsorship from my father's employer to come to America and begin a new life for their family. Although it was difficult to leave behind a wonderful community full of culture, heritage, and the love of family and friends, they were excited to start this new journey. As many have come before me who have immigrated to the United States and many others who continue to do so, there are valuable lessons we take away from our ancestors.

The beauty of the United States of America is the richness of diversity and multitude of cultures, experiences, backgrounds and perspectives. Being an immigrant, I have always appreciated the value of that diversity and am extremely grateful for the opportunities I have as an American. I became naturalized as a citizen when my parents became citizens since I was still a young child. I recall how they studied for the exam, even though their English was quite limited. My mother sat with a dictionary looking up and studying every word to make sure she was knowledgeable of all the vocabulary. They were excited, inspired and proud to become citizens of the United States of America!

My mother and father have been an inspiration to me throughout my life, even when I did not realize how much impact they had on me. All of my life's good fortune is due to their strong foundation of faith, strength, confidence, unconditional love and selfless generosity they bestowed upon me. Although they are no longer here to enjoy my achievements and blessings with me, they have left with me a legacy of numerous leadership lessons that I'd like to share.

## **10 Leadership Lessons Learned from My Immigrant Armenian Parents:**

### **Lesson #1 - Exceptional Work Ethic**

Working hard and pushing yourself to your fullest potential was instilled in me from the time I was a child and was given household chores and responsibilities at home. Both my parents set an example of hard work and doing their absolute best in everything they were involved in whether it was their family,

their jobs, their friends, their church or their community. They both emphasized and illustrated how a strong work ethic cannot only allow you to achieve great things but will set you apart from others.

### **Lesson #2 - Values-Based Leadership**

I learned early on how important it is to stay grounded in your values and priorities. First and foremost, know what they are and allow them to be a strong foundation of personal and professional empowerment. Identifying our values and incorporating them into our decision making and life choices allows us to stay true to our authentic self and be the leader we aspire to be using our values as our guide. Family was a top priority for my parents and everything they did reflected the importance it held for them.

### **Lesson #3 - Integrity and Honesty**

My parents had high standards for excellence and all their behaviors embodied the highest level of integrity and honesty. As a child, I learned that being the best person you could be meant being truthful, transparent and genuine. My father always said to me, "Do the right thing and you will never regret it." He was a survivor of the Armenian genocide and saw a lot of unthinkable things as a young boy. This shaped his character deeply to be the person of the highest integrity and honesty I have known in my life.

### **Lesson #4 - Empathy, Compassion, Kindness - Humility**

From a young age, I learned kindness and compassion exhibited from my parents through both their words and their actions. When she went to visit her twin sister in Armenia, whom she had not seen in many years, not only did my mother travel there with suitcases full of clothes and items to bring to them, she started the process of tirelessly working on sponsoring her twin sister's family of 6 to come to America. She also sponsored her brother's family to come here years before. My parents had so much empathy and wanted to be able to provide opportunities to them just as we had the good fortune of receiving. I watched their acts of kindness and compassion on a regular basis. Mom always said, "If you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all." They didn't talk about **emotional intelligence** but in reality, that is what they were teaching me. Stay positive, optimistic and be happy.

### **Lesson #5 - Service to others - give back to others and to your community**

Being of service to family, neighbors, friends, as well as to our community was a key part of my childhood. I saw my parents volunteering their time, talents and funds in so many ways. Not only did they believe it was the right thing to do but they truly enjoyed being of service to other people. I would see them light up when they were asked to be of help. Watching the pleasure my parents gained from giving back was inspiring and became a common theme in the lives of my brothers and myself. My service to others and community has evolved in the way that was role modeled to me by my parents.

### **Lesson #6 - Confidence, Believe in Yourself**

Although they would not speak of this belief or confidence in themselves, their actions instilled the importance of knowing yourself well and staying true to who you are and what you believe. Believing in one's self starts with inner strength. Knowing yourself, knowing your assets and leveraging those strengths is what I saw my parents do each and every day. They knew their sweet spots and excelled in those areas while having a thirst to learn more. All the while, having comfort and a deep sense of perspective staying grounded in their authentic true selves.

### **Lesson #7 - Be courageous, take risks and reach high**

Although my parents would not have described themselves as risk takers, the decision to immigrate to America was courageous and a big risk. It was frightening which did not hold them back because they had a dream that they wanted to pursue for their children. What they taught me was to find your purpose and passion, to chase it and fulfill it! Don't wait for things to come to you and do not be afraid to make mistakes along the way, which usually end up being our greatest lessons.

### **Lesson #8 - Stay open-minded to new opportunities, new situations and new people**

Be agile; keep openness to learning new things, new environments and unexpected directions or paths. My mother and father were curious, they liked to learn new things and try different activities in addition to being open to new possibilities and directions they had not planned upon. When one would be reluctant to push out of their comfort zone, the other would take the lead in doing so and encourage the other. They were my biggest fans, even when I didn't have the courage to push. They would paint a picture that inspired and motivated growth. They treated everyone with the same respect and dignity because they had an open heart and an openness to learn.

### **Lesson #9 - Resourcefulness - fuel your creativity and curiosity**

Dig deep until you find what you need and turn over all the rocks in the process. Relying on yourself to uncover answers and sources to those answers takes a lot of persistence, resilience and intelligence. Being resourceful not only requires the ability to know what the questions are to be explored but also the ability to be creative and tap into the right places to discover the solutions. I would see my mother set her sights on a new project and she would not rest until she had figured out how she was going to achieve the desired results. This also inspires and motivates others to follow your lead.

### **Lesson #10 - Spirituality and Faith**

Spirituality means different things to each of us and we all find our faith in our own way. Whatever the source of our spirituality may be, identifying it and allowing it to guide you is an important part of feeding our mind, body and soul in order to be at our best. My parents planted that seed within our family. They had deep faith and spirituality, which is a big part of our identity as Armenians. Last, but most definitely not least, spirituality and faith was the most compelling lesson I learned from my parents and has guided me throughout my lifetime, through all the peaks and valleys. It empowers me to have the strength, grace, confidence and wisdom to thrive and succeed.

As with so many immigrants, there are powerful stories that inspire us. I am one of the lucky people who had the opportunity to grow up in the United States of America with all of its incredible privileges and opportunities! I appreciate the learnings I've gained throughout my life and career; and to have the good fortune to raise my children in this amazing country and pass on these lessons to them. My Armenian heritage is deep rooted within my life with all of the fabulous food, music, dance, spirituality, and culture. I am proud to be an American and feel blessed to have had immigrant parents that taught me so much throughout my lifetime and their legacy will continue on for generations to come.

Rita Balian Allen is the president of Rita B. Allen Associates, a national career management firm specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, management training and career development. She is a lecturer at Boston-area universities, a sought-after speaker and presenter, the author of numerous articles, blogs and the book, "Personal Branding and Marketing Yourself: The Three Ps Marketing Technique as a Guide to Career Empowerment". She is a regular Huffington Post blogger and career management columnist for Leadership & Management Books. Rita was voted one of the top ten executive coaches by the Boston Women's Business Journal.