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## I've Been A Professor For Decades — But The 4 Most Important Lessons About Life Came From My Dog

"If you want to discover these same lessons for yourself, my advice is simple."

By Willie Pietersen

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In what you might call my third career — my 25-plus years as a professor of the practice of management at Columbia University's Graduate School of Business — I'm asked often about inspiring role models who helped to shape my personal values. Of course, there were many, from Nelson Mandela, the great statesman who led my native South Africa to democracy, to my mentors and colleagues at the multibillion-dollar businesses I helped to run, like Lever Brothers Foods Division, Seagram USA and Tropicana.

But the iconic figure whose lessons carried the most personal meaning for me was a four-legged companion by the name of Maisie.

Maisie came to my wife Laura and me from Guiding Eyes for the Blind, which trains dogs to serve as companions for people with visual impairment. At 18 months, she had "failed" her final test, thus becoming a "release dog" available for adoption.

It soon became apparent why Maisie had failed. She was just too eager to please, energetic and curious. Left in charge of a sightless person, she might have led them into all kinds of playful but inadvisable adventures. As a therapy dog, she wasn't a natural fit, but for my wife and me, Maisie was the perfect companion.

From then on, Maisie and I walked the path of life together. We developed a growing bond built on time spent in my home office, daily walks in the park, playing chase and traveling. We were seldom apart, and we learned to understand each other's moods, needs and expectations. This human-canine relationship revealed to me some of my most important lessons about life.



The author and Maisie in Central Park in 2007. COURTESY OF WILLIE PIETERSEN

### The Real Meaning of Transparency

Day in and day out, Maisie revealed her mood or feelings without reservation, whether she was feeling joy, fear, pain, hunger, playfulness, or just the need for a walk. No pretenses, no vanity, no ulterior motives, no fear of being judged; just plain honesty and, most important of all, humility. That kind of openness is something all of us could embrace more fully.

### Enthusiasm Is Infectious

My daily dose of enthusiasm came from Maisie. She responded with zest and joy to both small and big things, from a car ride or a new toy to a visit from a friend. During our early morning walks in Central Park, she sniffed the air with expectation, played eagerly with other dogs, chased the ball with joyful vigor, and licked the hands of her favorite people. Whatever she was doing, she was all in — fully committed. That spirit reminded me how much brighter life becomes when we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into it.

### The Magic of Empathy

Maisie mastered an impressive array of commands, and she enjoyed learning new ones. However, most of our communication was nonverbal. When she saw me preparing for a trip, Maisie made her feelings very clear: tail between the legs, head bowed, shadowing me around the house. The unmistakable message: *Please don't leave me.*

To spare Maisie, I once decided on a plot to conceal my travel. No packing, no suitcase, no visible signs of leaving. But somehow, Maisie still sensed what was coming. She was simply much better at interpreting me than I was her. Maisie reminded me that the highest form of empathy is the ability to hear what is not being said but is nevertheless being felt.

### The Meaning of Trust

Maisie and I depended on each other and enriched each other's lives, but she was the more vulnerable partner. I realized that the ultimate test of trust is how we treat those who rely on us but have no means of retaliation when we fail them. The abuse of power is the biggest breach of all.

I learned this with special force when Maisie reached the final stages of her life. Old age began to ravage her, and she struggled more and more. Under the watchful eye of our vet, we made sure she wasn't suffering pain as we kept putting off the awful moment when it would be time to let her go. But her discomfort and distress increased, and her joy of life faded away. We knew the end was coming soon, but we needed a signal.



"This is me with Maisie in Florida in 2015 during her final days," the author writes. COURTESY OF WILLIE PIETERSEN

On a sunny April day, I took Maisie out for a gentle walk. At a certain point, she stumbled and glanced up at me. Those wise brown eyes conveyed a message: I think it's time. Maisie trusted me to understand that her time was up and to be with her when the time came. The vet was kind and understanding. Tears were OK as Laura and I said farewell to our treasured friend.

Maisie may not have succeeded in her original calling, but she turned out to be the best kind of teacher. She showed me, again and again, that honesty, joy, empathy, and trust are the essential ingredients for leading a rich and meaningful life.

And if you want to discover these same lessons for yourself, my advice is simple: Spend time with a dog. You may be surprised at how much they can teach you.

*Willie Pietersen was raised in South Africa and received a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University. Over a period of 20 years, he served as the CEO of multibillion-dollar businesses. Since 1998, he has served as Professor of the Practice of Management at Columbia Business School, specializing in strategy and leadership. He has served as a teacher and adviser to many global companies. Pietersen runs his own bi-weekly podcast, titled "Ideas that Matter."*

*His latest book is "Leadership: The Inside Story," and you can learn more about him at [www.williepietersen.com](http://www.williepietersen.com).*

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