

Four things I learned from my friend, Brian Kelly



This week is a bittersweet week for me. My friend, mentor and colleague – **Brian Kelly** – left **EY** to assume the role of Chief Security Officer (CSO) at **Rackspace** in San Antonio, Texas. I am thrilled for Brian at the prospect of new opportunities and conquests. Hands-down, I believe there is no one better for the job and as a tribute to my friend and long-time colleague, I thought I would share with you some of the lessons I have personally learned from Brian over the years. Brian's positive traits are prolific so in an effort to keep this article concise, I limited my observations to the top four things I have learned from Brian during our many years of friendship.

But before I share some of Brian's wit and wisdom, let me tell you a little bit about the man and the legend of Brian Kelly.

Brian is not only one of the most talented executives with whom I have ever had the pleasure of working; he is always one of the most exemplary human beings I have ever known. Brian started his career in the

Air Force working on top secret missions around the world. He has briefed presidents, advised heads of state, protected diplomats, and that's just the stuff he can tell you about!







After proudly serving his country, Brian continued his mission of service in the private sector helping keep cyber attackers at bay. One of Brian's colleagues recalls him as "…fanatically upbeat despite the occasional band-aid on his nose from playing midnight hockey games at the local ice rink." Oh yeah, Brian is also a semi-pro hockey player. Just don't play him for money in a pick-up game; your wallet will regret it.



I met Brian in 2007 on an internal project to develop a whitepaper. As we worked more and more together, I stood back and marveled at Brian's ability to see the good in every situation, cultivate the best qualities in others and develop teams that achieved results they never thought possible. I have seen a lot of people lead teams through difficult projects, but no one cares more about the people than Brian. When times were tough – and we had plenty of those over the years – Brian was there to pick us up and help put things into perspective. Brian knows that we truly do not win unless we all get there together.

In watching Brian, I have come to one conclusion that seems to hold true no matter who you speak to: *Brian inspires.* His smile beams even before he enters the room, his laugh is legendary and I walk away from every conversation with him feeling like I could conquer the world…and I am not alone. The people

he has touched along his storied career have become leaders and continue to pay it forward simply by imitating what comes so naturally to Brian.

So, without further ado, I share with you four insights I have gleaned from Brian's leadership and friendship over the years.

1. Positive energy and smiles are contagious.



The first day I met Brian he greeted me with big handshake, a pat on the back and a beaming smile that lit up the lobby in which he came down to greet me. What I didn't appreciate at the time was everything that was on his plate: mountains of tasks, dozens of executive stakeholders, guiding multiple project teams and working on deliverables due to the board by end-of-day. But in the chaos of a busy day, Brian not only took the time to personally greet me and welcome me to the team, he had a smile on his face that seemed to say: "there is nothing we can't accomplish." I couldn't help but smile back at Brian that morning.

I accompanied Brian up the elevator to a conference room where our team was located. The room was abuzz with project activities and meetings in various corners of the small meeting room. Overwhelmed by the flurry of activity, Brian put his hand on my shoulder, smiled and said "…welcome to the team! We're really glad you're here. You're gonna do great." I smiled back at Brian – renewed with a sense of confidence – and got to work. Though the team went through ups and downs, Brian never stopped smiling and he was always the beacon of light that shone even when things got tough, which was when we needed it most.

2. Never underestimate the value of a good story.



Some people have a knack for telling stories. Brian Kelly is a born storyteller. Every so often I would come to Brian with a problem or an idea I wanted to kick around. Brian always made himself available to us any time we needed him; nights, weekends, early mornings… It didn't matter. Brian was always there. So, I would come to Brian with a stumper and he would listen with a smile on his face and that attentive Air Force gaze. After he had heard me out, he sat back in his chair and then he would tell me a story. Sometimes the stories related to comparable client situations and other times they were more allegories from his personal travels. Either way, each story was well-placed, well-timed and put things in incredible clarity. Sometimes Brian's stories were meant to draw parallels and provide insights, while other times they allowed you to open up your mind to avenues you had not considered. Somtimes Brian did not have the answer to my question; but rather, helped put the facts into focus so I could come to the conclusion on my own.

Brian's storytelling endeared him to his team, his clients and made him indispensable at board meetings where a well-placed story could put board members at ease or inspire a sense of urgency. Brian's talent for storytelling is a result of a life well lived but the way he uses the stories is a direct reflection on his understanding that: sometimes it's not about giving someone the answer, it's about allowing others to come to the answer on their own.

3. People come first. Always.



In the heat of project battles, people are often collateral damage; careers and professional advancement lying injured – or even dead – at the side of the road. All too often team members are victims of finger pointing, blame games and witch hunts to find the most convenient speed bump to throw under the bus. I'm not sure whether it was his military training or just his moral sensibility but Brian leaves no one behind and no one is ever thrown under the bus.

Brian understands the value of working hard towards a common goal of doing the right thing for others (clients, team, country, etc.). Do that and Brian will literally take a bullet for you. Brian has never said "no" to any request and has always put others' needs ahead of his own; sometimes to his own detriment.

Brian always put people first. Always.

4. Do good. Pay it forward. Repeat.



Brian makes friends wherever he goes. On our projects he knew the bartenders and hotel receptionists by name. He knew everything about his regular cab driver's life. He took the time to find out about you, as a person, and did nice things for you. He bought tickets for hockey games. He found restaurants he knew you would enjoy. He brought in your favorite bottle of scotch, even if you just mentioned it in passing. Brian went out of his way to *do good deeds.* He did it so often that people began to pay it forward to others around them. It created a domino effect of good deeds, and whether we realized it or not, those within a five person radius of Brian often started feeling unexplainably good. Brian taught us all to pay it forward.

There are so many more wonderful lessons and I took away from Brian over the years but these stand out as I make it through the first week without my partner in crime and long-time friend being on the same email domain.

Thank you, Brian, for all you have done for me personally and for making the world a better place for all of us.

Here's to you, Brian!








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