

# Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

## DEAD POETS SOCIETY

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Phone: 208-387-5318

Studio: Touchstone Pictures ..... Released: 1989

Genre: Drama ..... Audience Rating: PG

Runtime: 128 minutes

### Materials

Dead Poets Society video, video player, TV or projection system, Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles handouts (single-sided), Leading in the Wildland Fire Service, notepad, writing utensil

### Objective

Students will:

Identify various Wildland Fire Value and Principles that are either promoted or violated by leaders in Dead Poets Society.

Discuss the risks leaders take when using unorthodox methods to lead.

Discuss the pros and cons of conformity and nonconformity.

### Basic Plot

“Carpe diem” is the main theme of the movie. The story follows a teacher and his students at Welton School, a very traditional preparatory school for boys. A former teacher of the school, John Keating, uses his unconventional teaching methods to inspire his students to act as individuals – to avoid the conformity that Welton embodies. Nonconformity comes with consequences for many of the students.

## Cast of Main Characters

Robin Williams .....	John Keating
Robert Sean Leonard .....	Neil Perry
Ethan Hawke .....	Todd Anderson
Josh Charles.....	Knox Overstreet
Gale Hansen.....	Charlie Dalton
Dylan Kussman.....	Richard Cameron
Allelon Ruggiero .....	Steven Meeks
James Waterston.....	Gerard Pitts
Norman Lloyd .....	Mr. Nolan

## Facilitation Options

*Dead Poets Society* illustrates an abundance of leadership values and principles. Students should have few problems identifying those that correspond to the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles. The objective is not to identify every leadership principle but to promote thought and discussion. Students should be less concerned with how many principles they view within the film and more concerned with how the principles they do recognize can be used to develop themselves as a leader.

The film can be viewed in its entirety or by clip selection, depending on facilitator intent and time schedules. Another method is to have the student(s) view the film on his/her own and then hold the discussion session.

### Full-film Facilitation Suggestion

When opting for the full-film method, the facilitator may want to provide a break near the middle of the film.

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles with students.
2. Advise students to document instances within the film that illustrate/violate the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles on the handout provided.
3. Break students into small discussion groups.
4. Show students *Dead Poets Society*.
5. Break. (Suggestion: After Keating breaks through to Todd Anderson at approximately 0:57:57)
6. Begin the guided discussion.

7. Provide a short synopsis with some “ticklers” to pay attention before beginning the rest of the film.
8. Resume the film.
9. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that have difficulty.
10. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

### Clip Facilitation Suggestion

1. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Value or Principle targeted for discussion. (May be given or ask students to identify the value or principle being illustrated after viewing the clip.)
2. Show the clip.
3. Facilitate discussion regarding the selected clip and corresponding value and/or principle.
4. Break students into small discussion groups.
5. Have students discuss their findings and how they will apply leadership lessons learned to their role in wildland fire suppression. Facilitate discussion in groups that may have difficulty.
6. Wrap up the session and encourage students to apply leadership lessons learned in their personal and work lives.

### Mentor Suggestion

Use either method presented above. The mentor should be available to the student to discuss lessons learned from the film as well as incorporating them to the student’s leadership self-development plan.

Encouraging individuals to keep a leadership journal is an excellent way to document leadership values and principles that are practiced.

Suggest other wildland fire leadership toolbox items that will contribute to the overall leadership development of the student.

### Resources

- Clemens, John K. and Wolff, Melora. *Movies to Manage By*. Chapter 3 – “The Failed Promise of Heroic Leadership,” pp. 47-65. 1999.
- Frostberg State University. [\*Dead Poets Society\*](#).

Hyperlinks have been included to facilitate the use of the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program website. Encourage students of leadership to visit the [website](https://www.fireleadership.gov/) (<https://www.fireleadership.gov/>).

## Dead Poets Society

The following clips illustrate/violate the Wildland Leadership Values and Principles. These are only guidelines and may be interpreted differently by other views; they are presented as a guide for facilitation.

### Duty

- The Welton staff is expected to teach to the values of discipline, excellence, tradition, and honor. (Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.)
- Keating attempts to give students a look at life outside the confines of the classroom and textbook—teaches life lessons. (Develop your subordinates for the future.)
- When asked, Keating tells his students about the Dead Poets Society. He provides guidance when Charlie goes too far with an anonymous letter in the school paper. (Observe and assess actions in progress without micro-managing.) (Clip 1:19:58-1:21:12)
- Keating fails to recognize that Neil is deceiving Keating about talking to his father. (Develop contingencies and consider consequences.) (Clip 1:23:47-1:26:44)

### Respect

- Keating advises his students why poetry is so important to life. (Give the reason [intent] for assignments and tasks.) (Clip 0:24:27-0:26:46)
- Keating understands Todd's barriers and brings him to breakthrough. (Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.) (Clip 0:55:04-0:57:57)
- Mr. and Mrs. Perry fail to provide for Neil's need for extra-curricular activities. (Take care of your subordinate's needs.) (Clips 0:07:40-0:08:58 and 1:21:46-1:23:47)

### Integrity

- Charlie takes full credit for the newspaper article and denounces the existence of the Dead Poets Society. He does not implicate Keating for Neil's death and is expelled. (Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.) (Clip 1:15:05-1:18:30)
- Nolan approaches Keating regarding his teaching methods in the courtyard. Keating explains himself. (Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions. Keep your superiors informed of your actions.) (Clip 1:18:43-1:19:58)
- Although Keating teaches the students about free thought and nonconformity, he fails to teach of consequences to actions. (Share the hazards and hardships with your subordinates.)
- Mrs. Perry does not stand up for Neil even though she has compassion for his feelings. (Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character and skill level.) (Clip 1:40:05-1:42:41)
- Todd takes a stand for Keating in defiance of Mr. Nolan. (Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.) (Clip 2:02:40-2:05:20)

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## Dead Poets Society

### Guided Discussion – Possible Answers

*“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson*

1. Welton has a history of passing on the “light of knowledge” from the elders to the new generation, symbolized by the passing of candlelight. (Clip 0:01:18- 0:2:20) Share examples of how the light of knowledge is passed within the wildland fire service. How well do you pass the light of knowledge to your subordinates?
  - **Answers will vary, but may include: mentoring programs, contributing to the development of leadership activities and programs, leading by example, participation in staff rides, Leaders We Would Like to Meet, Wildland Lessons Learned Center.**
2. Tradition, discipline, honor, and excellence are Welton’s four pillars. However, students mock them by referring to them as travesty, horror, decadence, and excrement. What are the three pillars of the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program? How do subordinates in your organization view the values and principles?
  - **Duty, respect and integrity.**
  - **Answers will vary.**
3. Mr. Keating uses a variety of methods in the classroom to promote nonconformity. Give examples found within the movie. Provide personal examples of non-conformist behavior that you have witnessed. What are the pros and cons of both conformity and nonconformity?
  - **Keating’s methods may include:**
    - **Encouraging the concept “carpe diem” and following personal desires in a traditional, conformist environment. (Clip 0:11:34-0:16:40)**
    - **Reference to Welton as “Hell-ton.” (Clip 0:12:00-0:13:46)**
    - **Having students rip pages out of their textbooks. (Clip 0:21:00-0:26:46)**
    - **Having students view life from the desktop. (Clip 0:42:56-0:44:43)**
    - **Use of soccer practice accompanied by classical music to provide a learning breakthrough and understanding of concepts. (Clip 0:50:24-0:52:00)**
    - **Giving advice to alter behavior yet still encouraging that behavior (in response to Charlie’s article in the school paper) (Clip 1:19:58-1:21:12)**

- **Answers will vary. Ensure that students participate in respectful dialogue.**
  - **Pros:**
    - **Conformity: Group cohesiveness and sense of security in knowing what to expect.**
    - **Nonconformity: Promotes diversity of thought and innovation. Minimizes the potential for “group think.”**
  - **Cons:**
    - **Conformity: Lack of innovation and potential for “group think.”**
    - **Nonconformity: View that one is a radical/extremist. Pressure from leaders to conform. Unanticipated consequences as found in the movie: loss of job, expulsion, and suicide. Followers can blindly follow out of excitement instead of knowledge resulting in conformity.**
4. Keating challenges his students to “seize the day” and make their lives extraordinary. (Clip 0:14:33-0:16:40) What have you done or plan to do to make your life extraordinary? What do you want to be your leadership legacy?
- **Answers will vary.**
5. Keating uses interactive activities to address the concept of conformist behavior. Discuss in your groups those activities and how you might use similar methods to spur innovation and individuality within your organization.
- **Keating has his students view things in a different way by stepping upon the desk. He warns his students not to be lemmings. (Clip 0:42:56-0:44:43) He has his students walk in the courtyard to show how quickly conformity can emerge. (Clip 1:03:33-1:05:46)**
6. How effective is Keating’s teaching/leadership style? How does this style fit with Welton’s style? Have you had an experience where you didn’t conform to a particular organization and opposed their morals and values?
- **Answers will vary. Keating’s unorthodox style inspires his students, but conflicts with the traditional methods and standards set forth by Welton. Welton students are not encouraged to speak their mind, but to follow the structured academic path. Although extra curricular activities exist at Welton, few enter the realm of free thought and expression. Keating encourages his students to avoid peer pressure and rigid convictions to tradition—encourages them to think for themselves. Keating was a hero with his students but may have failed as a leader.**
  - **Answers will vary. Promote respectful dialogue.**
7. Keating stresses, “Now, devotees may argue that one sport or game is inherently better than another. For me, sport is actually a chance for us to have other human beings push us to excel.” (Clip (0:50:24-0:50:37) Give an example of how Keating’s

coaching produced positive results. As a coach of wildland firefighters, what do you do to inspire your subordinates to excel?

- **Keating produces a breakthrough with Todd to express his poetic thoughts. (Clip 0:55:05-0:57:57) Knox gains the confidence to pursue Chris. Neil, as fleeting as it was, experiences his true passion of acting.**

- **Answers will vary.**

8. Put yourself in the position as one of the Dead Poets Society members asked to sign the document against Mr. Keating. How would you have handled the situation? If you feel comfortable, share similar personal experiences with the group.

- **Promote respectful dialogue.**

9. Todd realizes that he has made a mistake by signing the paper denouncing Keating. He exhibits moral courage in front of Mr. Nolan when Keating returns to collect his belongings. Share examples of moral courage that you have witnessed?

- **Answers will vary.**

# DUTY

**Be proficient in your job, both technically & as a leader.**

- Take charge when in charge.
- Adhere to professional standard operating procedures.
- Develop a plan to accomplish given objectives.

**Make sound & timely decisions.**

- Maintain situation awareness in order to anticipate needed actions.
- Develop contingencies & consider consequences.
- Improvise within the commander's intent to handle a rapidly changing environment.

**Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished.**

- Issue clear instructions.
- Observe & assess actions in progress without micro-managing.
- Use positive feedback to modify duties, tasks & assignments when appropriate.

**Develop your subordinates for the future.**

- Clearly state expectations.
- Delegate tasks that you are not required to do personally.
- Consider individual skill levels & developmental needs when assigning tasks.

**Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.**

- Put the safety of your subordinates above all other objectives.
- Take care of your subordinate's needs.
- Resolve conflicts between individuals on the team.

**Keep your subordinates informed.**

- Provide accurate & timely briefings.
- Give the reason (intent) for assignments & tasks.
- Make yourself available to answer questions at appropriate times.

**Build the team.**

- Conduct frequent debriefings with the team to identify lessons learned.
- Recognize accomplishments & reward them appropriately.
- Apply disciplinary measures equally.

**Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.**

- Observe human behavior as well as fire behavior.
- Provide early warning to subordinates of tasks they will be responsible for.
- Consider team experience, fatigue & physical limitations when accepting assignments.

**Know yourself and seek improvement.**

- Know the strengths/weaknesses in your character & skill level.
- Ask questions of peers & supervisors.
- Actively listen to feedback from subordinates.

**Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.**

- Accept full responsibility for & correct poor team performance.
- Credit subordinates for good performance.
- Keep your superiors informed of your actions.

**Set the example.**

- Share the hazards & hardships with your subordinates.
- Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.
- Choose the difficult right over the easy wrong.

# RESPECT

# INTEGRITY

## **Dead Poets Society**

1. Document film clips illustrating/violating the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles.
2. Discuss leadership lessons learned from the film with group members or mentor.

## **Duty**

1. Be proficient in your job, both technically and as a leader.
2. Make sound and timely decisions.
3. Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised and accomplished.
4. Develop your subordinates for the future.

## **Respect**

1. Know your subordinates and look out for their well-being.
2. Keep your subordinates informed.
3. Build the team.
4. Employ your subordinates in accordance with their capabilities.

## **Integrity**

1. Know yourself and seek improvement.
2. Seek responsibility and accept responsibility for your actions.
3. Set the example.

## Dead Poets Society

### Guided Discussion

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