Reflections on Leadership

Relationships

My favorite story of the discovery of the complexity of relationships comes from an experience I had with my grandson, Ben when he was 5 years old. After spending the morning fishing together at a local farm pond he asked if we could stop at the Dairy Queen for ice cream on the way home. Being a typical over indulgent grandparent, I decided it was a great idea, even though it was less than an hour before lunch. I ordered an ice cream cone, and Ben ordered a large chocolate brownie sundae - a huge undertaking for a little kid. While he devoured the ice cream I asked him what we should tell his mother when we returned home and she asked if he was ready for lunch. He simply replied, "She won't ask, and I won't say anything." I suggested that we get our story straight, but he was insistent.

Sitting next to me in the front seat of the car on the way back to the house, I could see that my grandson was deep in thought. After some time, he turned to me and said, "My mom is your daughter." "Yes she is", I replied. He brightened up and exclaimed "We don't have to worry about the ice cream, because she can't tell you what to do! You could even put her in a time out chair if you wanted to!"

I tried to explain to him that while he got the basics of the relationship right, it wasn't quite that straightforward.

As we entered the house, my daughter, Michelle (his mom) said, "Ben, what would you like for lunch?" As he looked at me with a pained expression, I quickly said, "I took him to the Dairy Queen, and it will be a couple of hours before he is going to want anything else to eat." She turned to my grandson and said, "Ben, you can go and play, your grandfather and I need to talk." Ben smiled and quickly ran off.

That was the day that my grandson got his first exposure to the power and complexity of relationships. He learned two things. In spite of his understanding of the organizational chart of our family, his mom was really the one in charge. Secondly, the accountability for his behavior could be partially deflected to the senior officer on deck (grandfather), whose formal position provided him with some protection from the consequences of what they had done. This knowledge has been used in a variety of situations over the years.

We know from experience within our families that relationships are complicated. In many ways relationships with our work families are as complicated and vital to a satisfying life. Furthermore, healthy personal relationships are increasingly important for any organization that strives for excellence in a fast paced and changing world.

In his book **One Mission, How Leaders Build a Team of Teams**, Chris Fussell describes an equation for what he called an "aligning narrative" for General Stanley McChrystal's Special Operations Task Force. This equation was used to unify teams with very different cultures into a singularly focused mission.

The goal of this narrative was to eliminate excessive bureaucracy, create connections outside the normal chain of command, establish networks to improve collaboration, and encourage autonomy from a decision making perspective. While the military overtones in the book can make the message a bit harder to translate into everyday life, the simplicity of the equation has a ring of truth that can be applied anywhere:

Credibility = proven competence + integrity + relationships

Fussell's message is that credibility is the glue that bonds disparate teams together. Of the three ingredients needed to establish credibility, the most frequently ignored is relationships. Creating networks, collaboration, and overcoming bureaucracy to foster autonomy in decision making requires building strong relationships. He cites a number of examples where organizations have possessed proven competence and integrity and failed to achieve their objectives.
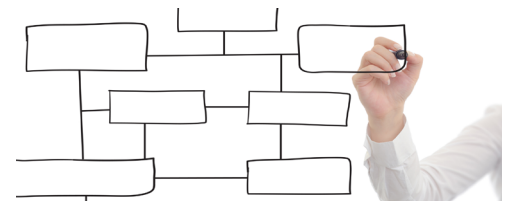
The truth is that every organization is teeming with formal and informal relationships. Formal relationships are easier to understand, as they are defined by titles and organizational charts. However, an organizational chart rarely presents a complete picture of the way things actually work. Informal

relationships, which are often more affected by personal and social factors, are harder to discern, but their role is critical, even in the presence of a well-defined hierarchy.

One of the central skills of leadership is figuring out how to forge positive work relationships, especially with people over whom you have little formal authority. In most organizations, titles have been losing the ability to command outcomes, while relationships have become increasingly more important. A reputation for fairness, honesty, respect for the opinions of others, and willingness to find areas of compromise in seeking solutions to common problems can be a tremendous advantage, especially when the edges of title and position power become dull and unable to cut through dense organizational undergrowth. But reputation can only take you so far. Lasting relationships are the result of direct personal contact and experience.

There are those who contend that building relationships is harder at this time than in previous generations. Simon Sinek's outstanding YouTube video on *Millennials in the Workplace* offers surprising insights into how the use of modern technology has become a barrier in the development of workplace relationships. He contends that authentic relationships are constructed through a process he describes as slow, arduous, and difficult, often occurring in the quiet moments around simple expressions of care and concern. Modern technology, like cell phones, can fill up every spare moment and leave little room for those

spontaneous occasions where bonding between human beings can occur.

What are the practical benefits of strong relationships in the work place?

- Relationships are the basis for establishing trust between individuals to encourage risk taking. The absence of trust results in "defensive decision making" that can slow progress down to a crawl.

- Relationships provide a sense of security that is the foundation for an open exchange of information and ideas. An honest and timely opinion from a co-worker just might help to avoid the kind of embarrassing mistake that we all have made at one time or another in our work lives.

- Crossing formal organizational boundaries to find solutions and respond more quickly is crucial to good customer service. One of my good friends, John Riewer, calls this a transformational process going from "silos to circles".

- Sharing personal and professional dreams and aspirations can become the springboard for higher performance, inspiring the team to reach beyond solving immediate problems to achieving excellence.

- A sterile or antiseptic work place can never be personally fulfilling, no matter how lofty the overall goals of the organization. Relationships are the key to humanizing the work environment and improving job satisfaction.

What steps can a leader take to develop positive relationships within their work environment? In his book, The Fred Factor, Mark Sanborn identifies something he calls the seven B's of relationship building:

- Be real. Always do your best at being yourself.

- Be interested (not just interesting). People are flattered when you express an interest in getting to know them better in an effort to serve them more effectively.

- Be a better listener. This will give you important practical information you can use to create value.

- Be empathetic. The need to be understood is one of the highest human needs.

- Be honest. Don't make promises you can't keep, or create expectations you cannot fulfill.

- Be helpful. Little things make a big difference.

- Be prompt. Helping people save time by being prompt and efficient is a gift of great value.

I would like to add one other dimension to the list. – Be Open. Don't be afraid to share something of yourself with others. Before you can be respected as a leader, you first need to connect with your co-workers on a human level, which is the common foundation for all relationships.

Cultivating relationships in the work place can be time consuming and messy. But without this key ingredient, the recipe for credibility and the benefits that follow will never be achieved.

Blessings,