Thunder and Dust

The personality of each horse is clear: the strong second-in-command just behind the leader, jockeying for position; the skittish chestnut; and the haughty grays. Considered individually, the horses are magnificent; as a herd in motion, they are breathtaking.

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Daring to Care

Build a heartfelt company.

by Mark Goulston

My greatest single achievement is that I dropped out of medical school twice and finished. And I didn’t drop out to see the world or discover my bliss. My mind had stopped working where I could study and understand information, but couldn’t retain or recall it. By the time I asked for a second leave of absence, Boston University School of Medicine had decided I was not a good investment. The Dean of the school met with me and directed the Promotions Committee to “Ask me to withdraw.”

Enter Dean of Students William McNary who: 1) Stood up for me by appealing the Dean’s and Promotions Committee’s decision; 2) Stood by me in and through that crisis and refused to let me fail; 3) Stood up to me in private to tell me that I had an inner quality of goodness and kindness that the world would one day value and need, but I would have to make it to age 35 to realize that; and 4) Stood up to me eyeball to eyeball to stop me from doing anything foolish when he told me: “You deserve to be on this planet.”

In actuality, I didn’t fully realize how much the world needed a dose of goodness and kindness until I was in my early sixties (slow learner).

When it hit me how I had been paying forward McNary’s goodness and kindness, I sent out a survey to my contacts asking them: What would be the positive effect on your people’s motivation, performance, results and engagement if you did unto them what someone did unto you who stood up for you when you couldn’t stand up for yourself, stood by you during a crisis and wouldn’t let you fail, stood up to you in private to push you to do something you didn’t think you were capable of, or stood up to stop you from doing something that was foolish and would have hurt your reputation, results and relationships? About 90 percent said the positive effect would be huge!

I then tested this amazing result in a presentation. At the start, I shared the story of Dr. McNary. Next I asked people to pair up with a partner and share the story of someone who did any or all of the above for them in their lives. Within one minute, a third of the people were shedding tears of gratitude as they shared stories of people who had intervened in their lives. I asked these people to share the story of the person and what special thing they had done for them. As each person shared their story, they cried even more deeply. I then asked each of them if they had any pains in their body—such as leg, back, stomach, head or other pains.

Several of them said they had such pains, but were not experiencing the pain now! Since that time, I’ve come to believe that an intense feeling of gratitude releases endorphins and causes people to not experience their pain.

I next asked and received two commitments from all attendees: 1) They would deliver a Power Thank You to the person they had spoken about and if they had died, to their next of kin. That thank you has three parts: Thank that person specifically for what they did for you; Acknowledge the effort that person made to help you in the way they did; Tell that person what their help personally meant to you. 2) They would pay it forward what that person did in the next two weeks and report in to their partner by: standing up for someone who couldn’t stand up for themselves; standing by someone who is going through a difficult time and checking in with them regularly; standing up to someone in private to push them to do something they don’t feel capable of, but that you believe they are; standing up to someone to prevent them from doing something foolish that would likely hurt their reputation, results or relationships, and that they would likely regret.

The results have been astonishing. People have reported that they didn’t realize what a great group of people were in their company. Some even used the word elite to describe the group. This process has also served as a deterrent to anyone who would sully the gratitude attitude that has since infiltrated and invigorated the companies. And many reported that thanking the people who had helped them made that person’s day, made their own day, and relieved their guilt for not having thanked them.

By eliminating the negative influence of naysayers, cultural change initiatives have a better chance of succeeding; after a year naysayers either become alien to the culture and change or leave.

Having edited Leadership Excellence magazine for 30 years, I confess that I sometimes struggle to get excited about yet another new leadership paradigm. However, Mark Goulston, M.D., co-founder of Heartfelt Leadership and best selling author, makes it easy for me to care. In Daring to Care, Mark shows us how to make caring actionable and build a heartfelt culture and company. His bold promise is this: “When you infuse your company with gratitude and create a pay it forward imperative, poor attitudes become alien to the culture and negative, high-maintenance people will either change or leave.” What leader or manager wouldn’t want that result? So, don’t miss the mark: Dare to care.

Ken Shelton, editor/CEO, Leadership Excellence

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ACTION: Build a heartfelt team and company.

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