

leadership instalments

You Are Not What You Do

By Dan Gaynor

WELL, THE TIME HAS ARRIVED ONCE AGAIN TO DIP into the Gaynor collection of classic Christmas movies for another seasonal look at leadership. This year I've chosen Irving Berlin's classic, *White Christmas*. Our theme is the trouble leaders find themselves in when the job becomes who they are, rather than what they do.

White Christmas tells the story of two army vets (Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye) who make it big in show business after the war. Along the way they follow their love interests to a small Vermont inn to discover that it is owned and run by Thomas F Waverly, the beloved major general who was relieved of his command just before the end of their time together in Europe. They find him downcast. He has invested all he has in the inn, the business is not going well, and their former commander just can't seem to get past his days in the army. Our two heroes decide to move their show to his inn to revive his spirit and his business.

The former major general's condition is one I see all too often. When leaders get too attached to a particular role or title, they can stay too long, missing signals that the time has come to move on. They can even make ethical compromises they regret later. At times the move is forced, as was the case with the major general. But even when leaders depart on their own terms, they often have trouble letting go emotionally. They find it tough to see the promise that tomorrow brings. They can waste years looking back, rather than forward to new possibilities.

I know something about this condition. I spent over twenty years in the newspaper industry before leaving eight years ago to begin my teaching and consulting business. I won't say leaving was easy - newspaper publishers enjoy a lot of attention and benefits within their businesses and communities. For many leaders the spotlight becomes difficult to let go of. I think it was easier for me because I never believed being a newspaper publisher was who I was, it was what I did.

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The early years that followed my departure were challenging as I went about building a brand new business, but it didn't take long before I was able to draw on my newspaper years as a source of inspiration for much of the work I do today without regret. People ask me often if I miss it, my reply is always, "Not a bit." I remember most of those years very fondly, but the last few were not good. Our company was sold, and I found myself trying to lead in an environment I was increasingly uncomfortable with - the time had come to leave.

For many leaders, the time arrives to leave - not to quit, but to close one chapter and open a new one. The last eight years at Gaynor Consulting have been among the most satisfying of my professional life. I thoroughly enjoy my work, and I like the sense of purpose I get from it, but still, it is what I do and not who I am.

Waverly learned that he had much to look forward to - it just took two old friends to help him find his way. So as you slow down a little this Christmas, pause to think about how you see your professional life. Remember that moving on, when the time comes, depends very much on the way you see your work today.

Discussion questions:

1. How do you see your work today?
2. In which other ways does allowing your work to define you create problems?

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