

Leadership instalments

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

By Dan Gaynor

WORK IS RELATIONSHIPS. ALL GOOD LEADERS

very quickly learn that most work requires some level of collaboration so they spend a lot of time on relationships. When they are strong, when people appreciate and even value one another, they collaborate and work together. As relationships deteriorate performance deteriorates. And relationships at work face a lot of daily pressures; this is when grace is tested.

Just the other day I was working with two middle-level managers who had crossed swords earlier the same morning – let’s call them Sam and Amy. Amy approached Sam and asked him to supply her with something she needed to complete a job. Sam somewhat matter-of-factly responded that it wasn’t his job to get it for her and told her where she could find it on her own. Amy angrily told Sam he wasn’t acting like a team player. She was feeling a lot of pressure to get the work done. Sam took offence. Sam was feeling his own frustrations and this no doubt contributed to his response. I once heard it said that you can only test a submarine’s hull by taking it down; it is pressure that reveals the cracks. I think this is true of relationships at work. In this case both left their encounter angry and hurt. They certainly were not feeling more motivated to help one another. I share the story because it is so common. Whether managers or employees, companies are clearly much more productive when people support each other and much less productive when they resist one another. This is where grace enters the equation.

I’m convinced grace can have transformational power. When a colleague says or does something that hurts or angers us most people respond with “fight or flight”. We meet the challenge with one of our own and strike back or withdraw. So let’s rewrite the formula, let’s call it “fight, flight or forgiveness.” Grace is undeserved forgiveness. Grace changes the conversation completely. Grace draws others closer. The remarkable thing is that it doesn’t matter which person injects grace it always changes the conversation. Had Amy or Sam responded with

grace it would have taken their conversation in a new and much more productive direction.

Now for anyone who thinks this is too soft for business or that the strength we value so much is demonstrated in overcoming someone else, it is grace that takes real strength. Counter-punching is easy.

Grace only comes with practice and it starts with self awareness. A caring and skilful leader can play a key role in helping others learn to replace fight or flight with forgiveness and grace, and by setting the right example. I’m convinced it would have a transformational impact on many workplaces. Grace has the power to convert conflict to collaboration. Learning how to coach it at work will take your leadership skills to a new level. This too will take thought and practice but it’s worth the effort. The results will be evident in more productive and more satisfying relationships at work.

Dan Gaynor

Discussion Questions:

1. **When was the last time you witnessed or participated in a discussion that left both people feeling angry, hurt or more distrustful? How do you think if affected their/your ability to work together well?**
2. **Do you agree that grace takes more strength than striking back?**
3. **How will you open a discussion about grace the next time you find yourself leading two employees who are in conflict?**

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