



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

February 2015 – Issue 57

Culture of Personality, Part 2

By Jamie Shallow



Jamie Shallow, ASA, MAAA, MBA, is associate director, Actuarial Services, at UnitedHealthcare in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and has a passion for transformational leadership and empowering people. He can be reached at jshallow@UnitedHealthOne.com.

“You gave me fortune. You gave me fame. You gave me power in your God’s name. I’m every person you need to be. I’m the cult of personality.”¹

Actuaries can find it challenging to transition from skilled professionals to effective leaders. In Part 1 of this series,² I laid the groundwork for how to lead through a culture of personality. Now let’s get into two final critical aspects.

PUSHING UP PEOPLE

I think in some ways, we understand there will be a change in focus when we reach manager level. Yet, what is often more natural for us is to focus on *managing*, and this may seem intuitive given that we are working at a manager level. A successful “manager,” however, needs to also be great at leading and coaching, and therefore a focus on managing doesn’t usually yield the optimal results. Executive coach Joel Garfinkle put it this way in a recent article:

Managing is largely task-oriented and focuses on activities like conducting staff meetings, delegating work assignments, organizing projects, giving feedback, and training employees. Coaching, on the other hand, involves collaboration, motivation, skill development, facilitating relationships and developing people who can contribute to the company’s mission and goals.³

For one of the most powerful examples in the history of American business on the effectiveness of leading by coaching, look at Primerica. This financial service company began as the A.L. Williams Company in 1977 and had record success under the leadership of a former high school football coach named Art Williams. You can research the details, but this highly successful company accomplished all that it did led by someone who openly admits to being rather “average and ordinary” on the outside (as in normal IQ), but who truly understood how to coach and motivate people.

In fact, one of my all-time favorite books is one that Art wrote called, *Pushing Up People*. In it, he discusses numerous leadership principles, including the idea that, “Leaders recognize the hidden qualities that bring about success, and focus on the ‘specialness’ of their people.”⁴ We should never miss an opportunity to praise someone for a job well done, and let them know how valuable they are.

Sadly, it seems that too often this opportunity is missed, as reflected in the following quotations:

Some people in management positions just do not seem to think that they need to let people know that they are valuable team members, and others in management positions are way too busy and do not prioritize internal relations.⁵

I once had a woman in class who had worked for a major telecommunications company for 19 years tell me that, in all that time, no one had ever told her “thank you.” Unfortunately, this example is not uncommon.⁶

CATCH THE VISION

Another area that can really help motivate people is to grab hold of the vision of the company. Helping your team to adopt the corporate mission can often help them see their work more as part of their life’s calling than just a source of income. Not everyone is necessarily wired to internalize this deeply, but for those whom it will motivate it’s an ingredient we don’t want to miss:

...[W]hen people lack purpose at work they feel like they are on a boat without a rudder. They lack direction as well as motivation. They also feel underappreciated and disengaged.⁷

Hopefully, most of the companies we work for have a mission statement that is worth getting excited about. We need to build on this. We need to make sure that everyone, no matter their role, understands that this is the heart of what we do. Art Williams

referred to this as becoming a crusader. A book I'm currently reading refers to it this way:

*If you want your employees to put more of themselves into their work, help them find more of themselves in it... if you want your employees to do their best, help them feel... most of all—as if they own the business.*⁸

My company's mission is "Helping people live healthier lives" and I absolutely take that to heart each day as I go to work. More importantly, I make efforts to instill that drive into my team. I realize that to analyticals like us, this may seem kind of strange. After all, how am I helping people live healthier lives by preparing a regulatory rate filing? Well, consider this story about President Kennedy's 1962 visit to the NASA space center:

While there, he finds a janitor sweeping the floors. He introduces himself, "Hi, I'm Jack Kennedy, what do you do here?" The janitor replies, "I'm helping put a man on the moon."

This person clearly understood that he was part of something bigger than himself, and took pride in the mission.

IT'S THE CULTURE

So, to be a successful leader, we need to begin to transition our focus away from promoting our own technical skills to developing the talent of the teams we are leading. We also need to become very humble in our leadership roles, and engage in the growth and motivation of our teams and the development of our culture, rather than becoming flashy superstar celebrity leaders.

This focus is always relevant to the success of a company, but all the more so when a company is in an environment of great change (as many of our companies are today). As Larry Senn is a highly regarded expert in the area of helping companies through change, we would certainly do well to never forget his words of wisdom.

As we witnessed change efforts falter time after time, we began to say to one another privately, and with some amusement, "It's the culture, dummy!" ●

ENDNOTES

- ¹ From the 1980s song by Living Colour, "Cult of Personality."
- ² You can find Part 1 of "Culture of Personality" in the November 2014 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at www.SOA.org/mpd.
- ³ Garfinkle, J. 2014, Jan. 20. *Let Your Stars Shine: Why Your Team Needs a Coach, Not a Manager*. Retrieved from <http://smartblogs.com>.
- ⁴ Williams, A. 1985. *Pushing Up People*. p. 9. Doraville: Parklake Publishers.
- ⁵ Keyser, J. 2014, July 31. *Emotional Intelligence: Key to Our Success*. Retrieved from <http://smartblogs.com>.
- ⁶ Stoker, J.R. 2014, Aug. 1. *4 Leadership Tips That Will Make People Adore You*. Retrieved from <http://smartblogs.com>.
- ⁷ Baldoni, J. 2014, April 9. *Working Without Purpose Is a Waste of Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com>.
- ⁸ Bruce, A. 2011. *Manager's Guide to Motivating Employees*. p. 46. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 2, p. 9.

This focus is always relevant to the success of a company, but all the more so when a company is in an environment of great change (as many of our companies are today).