

Be A Story Learner

(Adapted from *The Radical Edge: Stoke Your Business, Amp Your Life, and Change the World* by Steve Farber)

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The most impressive Extreme Leaders I've met over the years have a boundless fascination with and gratitude for the people around them—colleagues and customers alike. They notice others' accomplishments, to be sure, but they also learn their stories, understand their challenges, and absorb their hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Extreme Leaders are awake and attentive, observant and compassionate. And they exist in the unlikeliest of places—even in a bank.

When I first met him, Dick was running the check processing operation in the bank's corporate facility. It was the closest thing a bank has to a manufacturing operation and it had an ethnically diverse, primarily blue-collar employee base. Touring me around the facility, Dick beamed with pride and enthusiasm as he regaled me with story after story of unprecedented productivity increases and skyrocketing employee morale.

It occurred to me as we talked that Dick rarely used the pronoun, "I," as in, "I've done this; I've accomplished that." In fact, the word "we" didn't come up that often, either; instead, he told me story after story about individual people and how they'd risen to conquer one enormous challenge after another—and he told many of those stories with the hero standing right there. Some appeared embarrassed by the spotlight, but every one of them, without exception, expressed some variation of a glowing "thank you" before scurrying back to work.

It's not as though Dick didn't have an ego. He could puff out his chest along with the best of them, but he saved that for the appropriate time—usually after dinner and more than a few drinks—and always tempered his boasting with a good shot or two of self-deprecation. Moreover, he always brought it back to one central theme: his deep gratitude for his employees' spunk, imagination, personalities and drive. I remember getting the distinct impression that he was in awe of their accomplishments, and in retrospect, I could see that he was, indeed, fascinated with them.

Simply put, Dick loved the individuals on his team—even the ones he eventually had to let go.

Several years later, after his promotion to Sr. Vice President (which was essentially deity status at the bank), surviving a merger and moving to another division, Dick was charged with conducting what some euphemistically call a “reduction in force.” Over a 12-month period, he culled his division from 1500 people down to 175—mostly through outsourcing. During that same period, however, employee satisfaction percentages went from the mid 70’s to the high 80’s, raising steadily all throughout the process. That was—how you say—counter-intuitive. And it wasn’t because the survivors were happy to still have a job (which they were). Anyone who’s ever been through a lay-off will tell you that the event is usually characterized by increased stress, cynicism and even paranoia. That was not the case in Dick’s domain.

When I asked him how he accounted for the amazing spirit and morale even as people were jetting out the door, he said, “Two things: I kept everyone involved and I continued to let them know I cared—every freakin’ day.”

Take a lesson from my friend, Dick, and try this practice for yourself:

1. Write down the names of one or two key people internal to your business (colleagues, employees, staff, managers, partners, associates, etc.) and one or two key external people (customers, vendors, suppliers, etc.)
2. List everything you know about each person—beyond the “function” he or she serves. Assess how much you know or don’t know about each as a human being.
3. Ask each person to tell you one important story or event from his or her life. Or look for an opportunity to find out more during your next conversation. Ask each to share with you his or her number one business challenge.
4. Ask if there’s some way you can be of service—something you can do to help with each person’s challenge. Even if that person declines your offer, he or she will always appreciate your asking.
5. Pick one or two more people and do it again.
6. Repeat until you run out of people—for the rest of your life, in other words.

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