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Others

27. Kindness Is Free!

When it comes to a patient's evaluation of a hospital stay, you'd think that "getting well" was the heart of the matter, the alpha and the omega, not to mention the gammas and deltas, etc.

Wrong!

In one massive survey, Press Ganey Associates, the masters of evaluating hospital patient satisfaction, queried 139,380 former patients at 225 hospitals on that topic. After the data were collected, they teased out the 15 most powerful determinants of the patient's reaction to her or his experience.

And the winner [loser] is . . .

"Not a single one of the Top 15 sources of Patient Satisfaction had to do with the patient's health outcome. All 15, in effect, were related to the quality of the patient's interactions with hospital staff—and employee satisfaction among staff members."

None.

N-O-N-E.

Zero.

Z-e-r-o.

The study is reported in (and the quote above paraphrased from) *Putting Patients First*, by Susan Frampton, Laura Gilpin, and Patrick

Charmel. The authors are leaders at Griffin Hospital in Derby, Connecticut. Year after year it ranks near the top (Top 10 upon occasion) of *Fortune* magazine's Best Companies to Work For list—one of the rare health care institutions to do so. It also tops the charts on nearly every other measure you can name from patient safety to financial viability. The so-called Planetree Alliance, run from Griffin, is the epicenter of the “patient-centric care” movement.

The authors use the startling Press Ganey data as the jumping-off point for discussing the process and tenets that guide their work with staff and patients at Griffin/Planetree:

“There is a misconception that supportive interactions require more staff or more time and are therefore costly. Although labor costs are a substantial part of any hospital budget, the interactions themselves add nothing to the budget.”

Kindness is free.

“Listening to patients or answering their questions costs nothing. It could be argued that negative interactions—alienating patients, being unresponsive to their needs, or limiting their sense of control—can be very costly. Angry, frustrated, or frightened patients may be combative, withdrawn, and less cooperative, requiring far more time than it would have taken to interact with them initially in a positive way.”

The Big Lessons here—and they are big—are several:

(1) *Process frequently (usually? invariably?) “beats” outcome in assessment of an “experience”—even one as apparently “outcome sensitive” as a hospital stay. The positive quality of staff interactions were more memorable than whether or not the health problem was fixed.*

(2) *Happy staff, happy customers. Want to “put the customer first”? Put the staff “more first”! (More on this later.)*

(3) *Quality is free—and then some. We learned (well, most of us learned) when the “quality movement” dominated our consciousness*

that not only was quality free—but doing the quality bit right actually reduced costs, often dramatically. Same here!

And, to repeat (and what could be more worth repeating?) . . .

(4) *Kindness is free!!!*

► THREE OF A “KIND”?

“Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

—Henry James (in *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct*, by P. M. Forni)

“For many years literature was my life . . . One day, while lecturing on the *Divine Comedy*, I looked at my students and realized that I wanted them to be kind human beings more than I wanted them to know about Dante. I told them that if they knew everything about Dante and then they went out and treated an elderly lady on the bus unkindly, I’d feel that I had failed as a teacher.”

—P. M. Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (Forni is professor of Italian literature at Johns Hopkins University and founder, in 2000, of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project)

28. Civil! Civil! Civil!

This morning, as I write (in October 2008), I got a call from someone I knew a little but not at all well. He asked me to do something for a presidential candidate. (My candidate, about whom I was quite keen.) He began with a nasty, long-winded riff on how awful the other candidate was. On and on it went.

Until I hung up.

Yes, emotions run high in such campaigns.

(They have since the Adams-Jefferson slugfest in 1800.)

But that is no cause for incivility.

Ever.

I was tempted to swear like the sailor I once was at this guy—but it would have defeated my purpose.

Tempers flare in elections—and in business every day. (I possess a *very* hot temper, in point of fact—got it from my mom.) I don't object to sounding off in the privacy of a pub with two close friends. I do object to such intemperate sounding off in more or less public discourse.

It doesn't work, and makes you the idiot.

Advice:

Civil!
Civil!
Civil!

The more pissed off you are, the more you reach out to be civil.
Period.

➤ “CIVIL” RIGHTS—AND WRONGS

As a young man, George Washington copied 110 rules of civility into a notebook, Richard Brookhiser observes in his introduction to *Rules of Civility*. The principles were to guide Washington in the decades to come—and, in fact, marked him as a leader of singular character. The source text for GW was *Decency of Conversation Among Men*, compiled by French Jesuits in 1595.

Many of the 110 rules will seem—and are—dated. But even the least applicable smack of, indeed, civility and decency.

The “rules of civility” are about the attitudes one carries and the way one projects oneself. In the age of the Internet and social networking, though the words and conduits for action are different, the Big Idea is the same. (At least as I see it.) Grace, civility, decency, the determination never to disparage others, and the simple act of standing when anyone enters the room—these remain the essence of the effective leader’s temperament and the driving force in achieving things through others’ willing commitment. Perhaps these notions are more important than ever because they are honored in the breach more than ever, courtesy of our frenzied approach to life.

Silicon Valley, where I lived for three-plus decades, is a place in a hurry, where brusque seems to be the admired style. But thoughtfulness—a heartfelt reference to the illness of another’s spouse or the recent accomplishment of another’s child—goes just as far or farther in 2010 in Santa Clara County, California, as it did when the Jesuit fathers drafted their theses in 1595.

Sample rules of civility and decent behavior extracted from *Rules of Civility* (emphasis added):

#1—Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of **respect** to those that are present.

#22—Show not yourself glad at the misfortune of another though he were your enemy.

#28—If anyone come to speak to you while you are sitting, stand up, though he be your inferior . . . (Forget the “inferior” bit—I’ve been doing this *religiously* since I read the book; it “works.”)

#49—Use no reproachful language against anyone; neither curse nor revile.

#65—Speak not injurious words neither in jest nor earnest; scoff at none although they give occasion. **(!!!!!!!)**

#110—Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience . . .

Brookhiser offers commentaries throughout, and he closes with this: “[#110 is] the only open reminder of what has been implicit all along, small matters and large matters are linked; there are no great spirits who do not pay attention to both; these little courtesies reflect, as in a pocket mirror, the social and moral order.”

Civility 2010 = Civility 1776 = Civility 1595.
Period.

29. Listen to Ann— and “Act Accordingly.”

At an all-day seminar I gave a few years ago, the late Ann Richards, former governor of Texas, was the luncheon speaker. Feisty-fabulous Ann had lots to say of value, but one “obvious” (ain’t they always) item was a true whack on the side of the head. I paraphrase:

“Suppose you’re waiting in a long line at an airline desk to rebook your flight after it has been mysteriously cancelled. You are in a horrid mood, and the line’s imperceptible movement hardly helps. Finally, you make it to the front, and are in the physical proximity of that most loathsome of all creatures imaginable, a live airline employee.

“Take two deep breaths, smile with the smile you’d use if you were meeting Queen Elizabeth II, and say to yourself, ‘This woman/man is the only human being on earth who at this moment in time can help me with my most pressing problem.’ Then act accordingly.”

I listened.

I tried it.

It worked.

I do it as a matter of routine.

It . . . **always** . . . works.

Behave decently because it's the decent thing to do.

Behave decently because it works.

(Thank you, Ann.)

(We miss you.)

30. "Being There." (Or: How I Learned First Principles from My Grandfather's Last Rites.)

Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*) once famously said:

"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."

Mr. Carnegie's observation-commandment-towering truth came to mind when a good friend asked me to contribute to a compilation of "best advice I ever got" stories that he was putting together. I thought for a long time about his "simple" request. And here's where I ended up:

"My grandfather Owen Snow (my mom's side) ran a little country store in Wicomico Church, Virginia, in a part of the state called the

'Northern Neck.' As you might expect, we grandkids loved hanging out in the store—there were still barrels of this and that back in the late '40s and even the '50s. Sometimes Grampa Owen would let us measure something out—and he would turn tyrant, despite our youth and his affection, if we ever accidentally shorted someone by even a fraction of an ounce. He'd always pile a little something extra into a can of 10-penny nails, or whatever. One also noticed, to the extent that a kid could, that he always took his time with people, listened to their stories, nodded frequently, and treated everyone with the utmost respect.

"I was in the Navy in Port Hueneme, California, when Grampa Owen passed away. We were days from a deployment to Danang, Vietnam, but my commanding officer didn't hesitate for a second in giving me four days' leave, even though I was the so-called Embarkation Officer—there's a lesson for another day in that, too. Anyway, I made it to Wicomico Church in plenty of time for the service. Did I tell you it was a truly pipsqueak town, with, I'd guess, a population of 400 or 500, though my memory is cloudy? The roads were still pretty primitive, and it'd been dry for a while, as I recall. Around 8 A.M., the service was at 10, I thought I sensed the dust starting to stir. In short order, it was a veritable dust storm. (My God, I shiver, the memory is so clear.) The upshot of all this is that over 1,000 people showed up. I talked to several of them, none of whom I knew. It seemed as if Grampa Owen had lent each and every one a helping hand at one time or another—good advice, a call to someone somewhere who might help them out, an extended period of credit, a few bucks out of his pocket, whatever, and whatever, and whatever.

"The 'lesson' that funeral taught me was the power of decency and thoughtfulness. It wasn't that my mom and dad hadn't done a lot of that, but this was the Ultimate Technicolor Illustration. In the most unassuming way, Grandpa Owen had 'been there' for an entire community and beyond—and a great dust storm of people, some, who'd moved, from 100 miles away, had come to say one last thanks. If there

isn't a crystal clear message, and, de facto, advice in that, I don't know where you'd find it."

To make the obvious more obvious: How do you stack up on The Great "Being There" Exam? It's the ultimate "life question"—*and* the ultimate "business-career-success question."

31. Appreciating the Great Battle: A Case for Consideration.

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

—Plato

I ran across the above quotation two or three years ago. It's a saying that rattles around and around and around in my mind, and it has, I think, led me to Nirvana—that is, altered behavior on my part.

Consider: You are in a negotiation—or simply trying to engage one of your coworkers as an important project milestone approaches. The unassailable fact:

*That other person is . . . **always** . . . 98+ percent hidden from your view.*

Her mother has vision problems and is having the devil's own time dealing with them, and is making everyone within reach miserable in the process. His teenage son has suddenly started cutting classes—getting to the bottom of it isn't being helped by Dad issuing an endless stream of "cease and desist" orders. Or maybe it's not so oceanic—she had a testy encounter with a coworker yesterday and she's simply a little off balance. He's taking the family hiking for the

weekend—and he’s upset about the odds that a Client problem looms in the way.

Whatever.

And, yes, there are always “whatevers” piled on top of whatevers.

Even if you’re a somewhat avid major-league baseball fan, one of the 162 regular-season games is pretty much like any other. But not to the manager of, say, the Mariners. His “department” (25-person roster) is a godawful mess of professional and personal problems. So-and-so can’t shake a slump and needs a break—but there’s no way in hell that you can give him one. So-and-so has had a nasty personal incident reported in the paper in gory detail this morning; to use the vernacular, “Where’s his head at” this evening? And on it goes. And on and on and on it goes. Fact is, there are 162 scheduled events, called “games,” and each is more or less . . . **totally different** . . . from the one before and the one that follows.

Having said all this does *not* mean that our baseball manager has to be, in any way, shape, or form, a soft touch. It *does* mean, if he’s worth his salt, that he has to figure in all this “extraneous” (not!) stuff. And, of course, as those who know my biases are aware:

I see no essential difference between a 25-person baseball team and a 25-person IS or HR department, except that each work “season” (year) in HR or IS has about 220 “games”—that is, workdays. And each workday is different for each “player” (employee) as their “great battles,” per our instructor, Plato, unfold—mostly invisible to their coworkers and bosses.

“The boss’s job is not to be a shrink”—I’ve heard that one a hundred times. And it is utter baloney.

*It is precisely the boss’s job to be a shrink!
(At least if he or she gives a damn about getting things done.)*

Suppose you’re in charge of the President’s protective detail for a speech on farm policy in Des Moines tomorrow. Don’t you want to

know pretty precisely “where their heads are at” for the six agents physically closest to the President? Of course, these agents are the quintessential professionals—but along with that undoubtedly come an unusually large number of personal problems, and I’m not sure I want one of the President’s six closest agents to have had a knock-down, drag-out fight with her husband or 14-year-old daughter last night, and *especially* if that fight mostly took place long distance, over the phone or, God help us, IM-style.

So, *awareness* is called for—for the sake of enterprise effectiveness. And *empathy* is called for. No, not “softness,” as I said, but human empathy for the plight that besets all with whom we deal. It is *reported* (I can’t find the exact quote—though I’ve found 20 like it) that legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, a tough guy’s tough guy in a brutal profession, said, “*You do not need to like your players, but you must love them.*” Those precise words might not work for you, but the idea is unassailable for the effective boss, a four-star general dealing with three-star generals or the director of a community theater off-off-off-Syracuse, let alone Broadway.

Be kind, for everyone is fighting a great battle—I have redoubled my personal efforts to take Plato’s advice, every word of it, on board in every situation I face. Have I made better business decisions? I’d guess so, though I have no certain evidence. Do I feel like I’m a better human being—well, maybe, just a little. But, in keeping with the theme of this book, a “little” can be a bloody hell of a BIG lot!

(We’ll each choose our own route, if any, with this. In my case, I repeat more or less as mantra, before going into a meeting or making an important call, or most any call: *Be kind, for everyone is fighting a great battle.* I think it at least ups the awareness ante a notch or two.)

► MOODY BLUE DEVILS?

“Things don’t stay the same. You have to understand that not only your business situation changes, but the people you’re working with aren’t the same day to day. Someone is sick. Someone is having a wedding. [You must] gauge the mood, the thinking level of the team that day.”

—Mike Krzyzewski (“Coach K”), coach of the Duke University Blue Devils basketball team

32. Thoughtfulness Is Free (or Close Thereto).

I like, and value, the word *decency*—a lot. (See Steve Harrison’s phenomenal *The Manager’s Book of Decencies: How Small Gestures Build Great Companies*.) I like the word *respect*—a lot. (See Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s superb *Respect*.)

But I’m stuck on, hooked on, wedded to, wild about another word these (discombobulated) days: *thoughtfulness*. I am enamored with the idea of living and then adding to our formal or informal vision & values statement:

“We are thoughtful in all we do.”

I’m so taken with the idea that I suggest-urge-beg that “thoughtfulness” joins the likes of “people,” “customers,” “product,” “profit,” “action,” “Excellence” on the “10 Great Business Words List”—or some such.

Times are perilous.

Competition is brutal.

Hustle is essential.
Cost-cutting is imperative.

All true!

But how, in the process of getting from difficult here to difficult there in concert with our many constituents-stakeholders with whom we hope to do business over the long haul, do we “live in the world”?

Who are we?
How are we?
What are we as a human institution?
Who am I (boss, follower)?
What do I leave in my wake?

It’s character, in a way, to be sure. (Another stunningly important and, alas, underused word.) But, in a sense, thoughtfulness is even more encompassing than character. It is transactional—thoughtfulness applies literally to every internal and external activity, as well as being something that resides deep within.

I like the idea of showing up for work in a place that cherishes . . . *thoughtfulness*.

I like the idea of doing business with a service provider known for its . . . *thoughtfulness*.

I like being a vendor to an outfit that’s . . . *thoughtful*.

All this is X10 in troubled times.

Thoughtful is *not* “soft.”
No.
No.
No.

And:

No.

No.

No.

In fact, I'd contend that "dogmatic thoughtfulness" (now *there's* a term) improves growth and profitability and long-term enterprise solidity in a pretty damn direct, high-impact, ultimately measurable cause-and-effect way.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to customer retention.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to employee recruitment and satisfaction.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to brand perception.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to your ability to look in the mirror—and tell your kids about your job.

"Thoughtfulness is free."

Thoughtfulness is **key** to speeding things up—it reduces friction.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to Business Issue #1, cross-functional communication—XF communication is 98 percent a matter of social factors.

Thoughtfulness is **key** to transparency and even cost containment—it abets rather than stifles truth-telling.

So think about thoughtfulness, think about the truth, or not, to your mind, of the list above, think about adding "*Thoughtfulness in all we do*" to your unit's (or company's) (or agency's) values statement.

But . . . do so only after you and your team have figured out exactly what thoughtfulness means in a variety of contexts. And do so only after you have made a demonstrated personal and organizational

commitment to thoughtfulness. Thence, you must be unabashedly devoted to keeping one another honest in the practice of Dogmatic Thoughtfulness—with, alas, adverse consequences, eventually severe, for those who fail to take this essential attribute aboard.

Starting time?

Not “today”—but “now.”

That is, thoughtfulness is an especially potent “tool” in crazy-disruptive-scary times.

Hence:

Consider the idea of: *“We are thoughtful in all we do.”*

What does it mean?

How does one practice it?

Talk about it with peers, pals, vendors, customers, etc., etc.

Talk about thoughtfulness—**“The Practice of Dogmatic Thoughtfulness”**—as a powerful and pragmatic business value. (Again, especially in traumatic times.)

Keep debating.

Consider adding “Thoughtfulness in all we do,” maybe “dogmatic thoughtfulness in all we do,” to your formal values proclamation—or otherwise vigorously promoting the idea.

(NB: You must also come to agreement on the immense “bottom line/\$\$\$\$ value”—pragmatism of this idea before formally proceeding; it may well make you a better person, but it is not in any way a “mushy” idea.)