Pat's POV — October 2012

Misguided Selflessness

Being a leader is a lonely job. There is no doubt about that. Anyone running an organization – a corporation, a department within that corporation, a school, a church, a battalion or a local business – must accept the fact that the role they have is often a difficult, sacrificial and solitary one.

But that doesn’t mean it should be thankless or unfulfilling. Or for that matter, always lonely. When humble, well-intentioned leaders convince themselves that they are supposed to be completely without needs, they create big problems for themselves and their organizations. Let me explain.

Even the most mature, humble and unselfish leaders are inevitably going to find themselves in a position of need from time to time. What I’m talking about are genuine feelings of disappointment, frustration, under-appreciation, burn-out.

Most really good leaders, believing they are doing the right thing, tend to deal with these feelings on their own. Maybe they have a spouse who is good at listening, or perhaps they have a reliable executive coach.

Other good leaders do what my high school football coaches used to tell us when we were tired or a little injured: “suck it up.” Essentially, they ignore their feelings, reminding themselves that their job is a difficult one and that they should be tougher.

But neither of these strategies is completely sustainable. Eventually, even the toughest, most emotionally durable leaders must address the legitimate feelings they have with the people who are most directly involved with the issues that are causing those feelings. Because when they don’t, they inevitably put themselves in a position to harm their organizations.

When human beings allow genuine feelings to ferment without resolution, they eventually, and often unconsciously, let those feelings leak out in one unproductive, unresolvable way or another. In most cases, they end up behaving in ways that are slightly passive aggressive, autocratic or unnecessarily critical of team members. I know this because I’ve done it a few more times than I care to admit.

Team members, who don’t know what is going through their leader’s mind, can’t possibly understand where this is coming from, and so they’re left to either acquiesce to the sudden autocracy, or to resist the leader’s arguments and criticism. Essentially, they
are blind to the real issues at play, which leaves them incapable of responding in a productive or useful way.

The only way for leaders to address this kind of situation effectively is to openly admit to their team that they feel frustrated, or disappointed, or over-burdened, or under-appreciated. Then they’re going to have to let their team members digest that information, and begin the messy process of working through those issues with honesty and humility.

Most good leaders who are reading this are probably thinking, “The last thing I want to do is tell my direct reports that my feelings are hurt.” They’ll be afraid to come across as weak, or even worse, needy. As noble as that may seem, in reality it is a subtle form of pride and invulnerability. Leaders are just as human as the people they lead yet they often refuse counsel from their team. Worse yet, it deprives staff members of the information they need to figure out what actions they can take to alleviate those feelings.

The truth is, when humble leaders acknowledge their humanity, even when that humanity is not necessarily pretty, they are giving their people a chance to understand what is really going on in their leaders’ hearts and minds, and allowing them in that moment to be the stronger party in the relationship. Not only will that allow them to address whatever issues need to be resolved, but it will make the team stronger and more resilient going forward.

Now, that’s the end of my POV, but for those of you who are parents, I’ve added an additional commentary here about how this same principle applies to the job of leading children and families. Let’s take the fictional example of a father with two teenage boys named Matthew and Connor Lenci- the last name isn’t important. After all, this is fiction.

As the night comes to an end, the fictional father reminds his sons that one of their few chores – putting the garbage cans out for trash day – has yet to be done. The next morning, the garbage cans are still nowhere to be seen, because neither of the boys fulfilled their responsibility. Worse yet, when reminded, they shrug their shoulders like it’s no big deal.

Okay, this is a moment of truth. The fictional dad will usually do one of two things – neither of which is terribly effective. Sometimes he will simply go and put the garbage cans out on his own, convincing himself that his sons are busy and that he’s a selfless dad. Other times, he’ll loudly admonish his sons to “get their butts outside before the garbage truck comes and mom has to call the garbage company to have a special trip made which will cost the family money that will come out of their allowances..!”

Neither of these options is usually the best approach. Though sometimes a good parent/leader needs to pick up the slack for a busy child/employee, and sometimes he has to get a little upset and demand action, there is another way that usually works better, but is rarely used.
As a parent, the best thing I can do for my boys, my family and myself, is to sit down with my sons when the situation is not red-hot, and let them know that I feel a little disappointed, disrespected or underappreciated by them. Without passive aggressiveness or stinging guilt, I simply need to ask them to see the situation from my point of view, and invite them to imagine what it is like to be me. In most cases, even with teenagers, the response is one of genuine empathy, understanding and contrition, usually leading to a change of behavior.

But this requires that I, as a leader, set aside my authority for a moment and become a vulnerable human being. Without being pathetic or weepy, I need to be honest about my feelings as a person and treat my sons with the level of trust and responsibility that I believe they can handle. This will give them the information they need to make the decisions that will bring about the best possible outcome for everyone.

The only way for me to do this, however, is to avoid the pride-filled temptations to be a lonely martyr or an indignant tyrant. Ultimately, neither of these provides my sons with the information or perspective they need to become the people they need to be. My vulnerability in acknowledging that I have feelings, rather than being an agent of selfishness or neediness, is actually a gift to them.

And it will probably get the trash out on time too.

Yours,

Pat Lencioni

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