

Creating Confident Organizations

A CEO to CEO Quarterly Newsletter

FROM THE DESK OF BOB WILSON

Tears, Smiles and Leadership

Dear Fellow CEO:

We tend to think of leadership in terms of the ability to get people aligned in getting things done; accomplishing a goal, achieving a result. Experts talk about the skills and traits of leadership in terms of communication, teamwork, results orientation, sense of urgency, self awareness and humility. Many of these are measured by tools like P. I. and 360 feedback. While each measured skill or trait is invaluable for a leader to possess, they all ultimately miss something that can't effectively be measured, that can only be felt because it's too intangible – a leaders' humanity. Leaders function best when they show their own humanity to those who follow – when they sincerely show others the heart-felt emotions indicated by a smile or a tear.

Shortly after 9/11, George W. Bush rallied the American people to his leadership when he responded to the depth of sadness he (and we all) felt from that tragic event. His display of vulnerability united our country at a time when we needed it. Our leader showed his humanity in a very public and personal way and the country responded collectively saying, "We'll follow you wherever you lead us." In that moment he became one of us and, paradoxically, his leadership gelled.

While displays of vulnerability bring people closer to leaders, peoples' natural tendency is to distance themselves from them. Without consistent reason to come closer, followers tend to develop leadership entropy; they tend to feel that somehow, leaders are different from the rest of us and the psychological space between leader and follower tends to naturally, when left untended, expand.

Until I got close to becoming "The Leader", I know I saw leaders as different from everyone else – certainly different from me. I didn't know how they were different – they just were. Today, I know leaders and followers are all just people – trying to do their best doing whatever they're trying to do. Leaders are just as human and vulnerable as followers and there's nothing wrong and everything right with showing humanity and vulnerability. It's the only way to slow down the entropy.

Showing humanity through sadness isn't the only path to a closer bond between leader and follower. Laughter is just as important and there are plenty more opportunities to engage in it. So many things happen in and around leaders that if s/he doesn't have the ability to laugh; surely s/he would have to cry. And, while tears of joy, sadness and sorrow are acceptable as positive signs of humanity; tears of anger, dejection and self-pity aren't. Those aren't signs of vulnerability; they're signs of arrogance, retreat and failure. So, when we're faced with those situations that could draw out anger, dejection or self-pity, we'd better start looking for the humor.

But, we can't stop there. We've got to bring humor with us wherever we go.

Why is humor both so valuable and so necessary in a leader? First, when you smile yourself, or even better, induce a smile in others; you're exposing your humanity to those around you. Your position as a leader becomes more approachable to those around you; and you yourself become more approachable. A smile makes it easier for those who need to, to get close enough to follow.

Yet, knowing the importance of this, I know I don't smile enough. When my highest B boys were little (Jake, the low B didn't notice), they'd frequently ask me what was wrong because what they saw on my face was a scowl. I'd smile and say, "I'm just thinking about something," which, in fact, I was. They'd typically say, "OK", they'd smile and go back to their playing. In my mind, I didn't have a scowl on my face. I was just working. But, a scowl is what they saw.

Adults generally aren't uninhibited enough to ask leaders why they're not smiling. But, they frequently think it when their leaders' good humor isn't apparent and the scowl of thought or work is on his or her face. And where that negative sense is felt by those around us, it has a negative impact that can be contagious. It fosters the entropy that grows between leader and follower. The best antidote is to try to smile or laugh whenever and wherever you can.

Does that mean leaders need to be comedians? No. In fact, I think where leaders go out of their way to be funny it can get in the way of getting the job done. It doesn't hurt to tell an occasional joke or try to bring levity to a tense situation, but if the office of the CEO feels like a comedy club, there's likely not a cultural predisposition for getting work done.

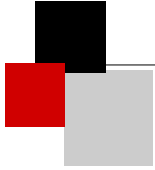
The precedent that should be set is one where work both gets done **AND** fun is had along the way. The Indianapolis Star recently quoted a study done by the people who make Ritz Crackers saying 77% of people feel the ability to have fun is an important part of choosing a job. We want to keep our employees at their work by doing our best to energize their efforts. This is done by providing them with work that matters, work that the individual can do well, and work made to be as fun as work can be.

Jasper Engines & Transmissions, one of our longest term and most successful clients, has a very simple Mission Statement: "Do it Right and Have Fun". Doug Bawel and his team have over the last couple of decades built the organization into the largest remanufacturer of gas and diesel engines, transmissions, differentials, rear axle assemblies, marine engines, stern drives, performance engines, and electric motors in the nation. The company has grown its employees by more than 7 times since 1987 when we first started working with Doug (when he was their sales manager). Very few people smile more or have more fun at work than Doug in what should be (and is) a hard, tough business. Doug and his team strive to make their work at the Engine Exchange fun and I believe the benefits are huge. The results sure have been.

Many of you may remember a sitcom from the 80's called The Wonder Years. One of my favorite episodes (and I loved the show) was one where the low B dad (played by Dan Lauria) was talking to his high B son Kevin (Fred Savage) about work. The son said to his father something like, "Dad, you never look happy when you're working. Don't you think you should have some more fun at work?" To which Dan Lauria got close to his son, gave him his best low B scowl and said, "Kevin, don't you understand why they call work, work? It's because it's supposed to be work, not fun. Fun is what you do when you're a kid. Work is something you do when you've got a job."

That stuck with me as sadly funny (then, and all these years later, too). It was a testament to how so many people look at their jobs. A job is work. You do it. You get paid. You go home.

But that's taking a defeatist attitude that we all know doesn't have to be taken. Work can be fun. It needs to be fun. Most of us got into leadership positions because we knew that leadership would be fun for us. And we're the people who are ultimately charged with making work fun for everyone else as the leaders of our respective businesses. We need to recognize that, for the most part, we're in leadership positions because we find them enjoyable. We like the idea of being in charge. Why not simply resolve to enjoy it more? Let the reality that you enjoy what you do show through as often as you can. Make it your business to smile. Make it your business to try to diffuse difficult situations with levity. Encourage your people to have fun at work.



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I'm not saying we all need to emulate Jasper Engine and Transmission and put "Fun" in our Mission Statement. But, I think we all do need to make sure people see our humanity through the easiest and simplest way we can provide it – a smile.

So, while we're doing what we enjoy doing, be sure that more often than not people see you with a smile on your face and joy in your heart. It does our employees, the world around us, and ourselves a whole lot of good. When we're delivering good humor day in and day out we're creating a culture that will ultimately succeed because it's a culture that's based in the core of what's best about all of us – our humanity.

You needn't shed a tear for me; I've got some smiling to do.

Thanks for reading,

Sincerely

Bob Wilson, President

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