

Life's Leadership Lessons

Learning about leadership along life's pathways

Copyright © 2007 by Richard W. Weaver

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means in any manner whatsoever without written permission of Richard W. Weaver except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover photo courtesy of pdphoto.org

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-60458-081-5

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007938577

Printed in the United States of America.

Maria

Leaders are everywhere

It was a normal office area. On one side of the room ten normal office-type desks, each with a normal assortment of in and out baskets, pencil cup, PC, telephone, calendar, and stapler. On the other side were eight more normal desks and the room's two doors. Between each desk stood a 5 foot fabric lined divider providing some sort of individual privacy for the customer service representatives.

Pinned to the fabric in each of the normal cubicles was an assortment of normal cubicle wall hangings: family pictures, certificates, motivating cartoons, memos and the like.

Throughout the entire area there was a normal assortment of common office plants.

Nothing set this office apart from any other office for any corporation in any part of the world.

Yet there was something different about this office. Something abnormal. Something unexpected. Or should I say, "someone unexpected."

When it happened the first time it was as if someone had started a game. Workers were suspicious in an excited sort of way. "Who did it," was on the lips and minds of everyone in the department.

"How sweet?"

"Wasn't that thoughtful?"

“There is an angel among us.”

The incident that started this game of curiosity was an innocent little card left on the keyboard of one of our Customer Service Representatives. The prior day she had gone out for lunch and was involved in a minor accident. Although there were no injuries, she had been quite upset as the car had been loaned to her by her parents.

The card was not fancy -- it actually appeared to be the kind that came in an assortment purchased at the dollar store. The front was a flower with the words, “to brighten your day.” Inside someone had written the words, “sorry about your accident, I hope today will be a better day.”

After several days of investigation, nobody came forward to confess the good deed and the curiosity waned.

The following week another employee arrived at work to find a card had been placed on her keyboard. The cover was another flower with the encryption, “Thinking of you.” Inside an anonymous handwritten note proclaimed, “I know today won't be easy, but remember people are praying for you.”

People's curiosity and once again been aroused wondering who had left the note. It had to be someone from the department because no one else knew of the conversation that prior day concerning this ladies sorrow at the anniversary of her mother's death.

As with the first incident, nobody came forward to confess the good deed.

The unlikely perpetrator

Weeks and months would pass with additional cards being left as a morning welcome to people who needed encouragement for the day. Somehow someone knew that a little extra encouragement was going to be needed that day for the person who would be typing on that keyboard.

Out of my own curiosity I tried to discover the angel's identity. No candidate immediately jumped to the top of my list.

Asking people on the side in impromptu one-on-one conversations revealed no suspects. Their identity was well guarded.

Then, one night while I was at the office late I got a huge break in my investigation. Everyone had gone except for the cleaning crew as I tried to tidy up a few loose ends from my task list. I had some notes for the employees and decided to put them in their “in” baskets.

Walking through the department I was shocked to see a card on one of the keyboards. The cards are prized possessions, cherished by the receivers. Never had one been left untouched for the entire day.

My first thought that it was one of the employees that perhaps had been staying late and putting the card on the keyboard before leaving. That could not have been correct because the employees had already done their own informal handwriting analysis and could not match it with any of the employees.

The
Complimentary
Cards are prized
possessions of
all whom
received one.

My next realization was that it had to be someone from the cleaning crew. There were three people on the crew. Sam, the supervisor, worked along side Maria and Eva.

I picked up the card and approached Sam. He saw me coming and noticed the card in my hand. Discreetly he put his finger over his lips to let me know he was about to share a secret. Then he pointed to Maria.

I put the card back on the keyboard without saying a word. Maria seemed to like her unanimity and it did not seem right to spoil it.

Six ways anybody can be a leader

Maria did not have a traditional leadership position. She wasn't the chairman of the board, or a vice president, or even a supervisor.

She was the cleaning lady.

But if a leader is someone that motivates, encourages, and creates a positive work environment where people can excel, Maria was a leader in every sense of the word.

Here are the leadership skills Maria exhibited:

1. **Encouragement.**

When employees had a challenging day it would not be uncommon to see a card the next morning telling them, “I feel you did a great job yesterday. I sense you will have another great day today.” Oddly, the notes would refer to a specific incident.

2. **Empathy.**

Maria was able to put herself in the shoes of the people she sought to encourage. It was as if she shared their experiences by living them herself. She knew when someone needed encouragement and she provided it.

3. **Humility.**

The notes were never about Maria nor did Maria ever take credit for leaving them. The spotlight was never on Maria -- the spotlight was for the other employees.

4. **Uplifting.**

Maria made others feel important by letting them know someone was concerned about them and their well-being.

5. **Role model.**

Maria showed others that teamwork means compassion and sensitivity. She observed and interacted without being overbearing. She was professional. She set a standard others could follow and she lived that standard.

6. Relationship builder.

Although she did not directly work to build relationships, Maria's cards got employees to talk to each other in a relationship building manner. While curiosity was aroused, it never had a negative impact on customer service or productivity.

Everyone can be a leader

I never found out how Maria knew when and where to leave a note. A leading suspicion is that Maria got her information at the time clock each night. She was probably attentive to the conversations taking place as employees were leaving for the day.

Regardless of how Maria got the information she needed to leave the appropriate cards at the appropriate time, I am sure it was through normal office events.

There was nothing unusual about Maria. She was just a normal person, doing a normal job, in a normal office, in an extraordinary way.

Not only did Maria prove that leaders exist at all levels of the organization, she proves that everybody in an organization has the ability to be a leader if they so choose.

One who knows how to show and to accept kindness
will be a friend better than any possession.

Sophocles