



Want To Be A Leader At Work? Look To Nelson Mandela

Insights

12.05.13

After 30 years of seeing the worst of the workplace, I have few heroes left. Today, I lost my JFK or MLK. I'll remember where I was sitting when I learned that the lion who was Nelson Mandela, had roared his last. I choose to believe that's how he went out. As a lion of a man.

My 19 year old son and I were in Soweto last June when everyone expected Nelson Mandela to die. It's hard to describe our feelings as we sat in his church near his home. We pondered all that we had learned in South Africa in the preceding weeks. Nelson Mandela was far from perfect; nor is South Africa, which makes both his memory and his country more precious.

You intellectually realize the atrocities of the former apartheid regime but cannot truly appreciate what the people endured until you have visited the former work hostels where black workers stayed, often for years, separated from their families. Or learned about the extraordinary bureaucracy that developed in the late 40's to consciously degrade and keep blacks as a subject unskilled labor force. Even education was skewed as a type of social programming. Thank God for the many brave mission and church schools. Finally, we're not talking about thousands murdered; we're talking about hundreds of thousands. It would be a bit difficult to criticize apartheid's former victims for their anger. And yet, that's precisely what Mandela did. He was a tough man, a former boxer, and a man who could make a Minister of Justice feel like an errant schoolboy when he met him in prison. A man's man, and a man who had himself suffered much.

Don't idealize Mandela's actions like some mythic saga. He was, as I said, a flawed human being who also made mistakes. So consider what it took for this man to lead his entire nation to forgive and to seek to move forward. Only Mandela and the faithful Bishop Desmond Tutu would have held televised reconciliation hearings where former apartheid leaders and their lowest minions would be pardoned if they testified to their wrongdoing. Why? To bring closure. Imagine being a parent or spouse, who until these hearings, had never been told, "yes, we killed your son 20 years ago. He's not coming back. Begin to heal." Closure.

Lessons For the Workplace?

There is an educational theory that we absorb great ideas through reading the great books. Although we look for prescriptions and formulas for leadership, business or safety success, there is no substitute for reading about great leaders and the times in which they operated. Take them off their pedestals and you'll learn much from the errors of George Washington, Lincoln and U.S. Grant. And yet the last time I checked they changed the world. What can you learn from George Marshall

yet, the last time I checked, they changed the world. What can you learn from George Marshall, Roosevelt's general who picked the generals who won WW II? Learn from Mandela's life. He was a shrewd man as well as genuinely noble. Ivory Tower types didn't defeat Apartheid or lay the foundation for a new society. As one Black survivor of Apartheid excitedly told me, "some day we'll even have a white president!" These leaders screwed up, took risks, and determined to do the right thing. Learn from them.

Second, manage that anger. Don't make excuses. Were you locked away for 20 years literally breaking rock in a silica ridden atmosphere? If not, control that temper and tongue; especially in the workplace.

Third, regardless of your political persuasion, don't focus on "diversity efforts" or politically correct behavior. You're setting far too low a bar. Use our continuing challenge to build a merit-based color/race/sex blind workplace as a motivator to practically work out how to be a responsible supervisor and a compassionate coworker. I pride myself on my toughness and pragmatism. Like Mandela, I used to box and fight. But as mid 50's senior partner and leader in a national firm, I understand that a lot is expected of me. I need to consider how to genuinely develop the next group of leaders, and guys like me set the tone for genuinely appreciating one's workers, and showing it. Every day we read good articles on effective management, leadership, engaging employees and attracting talent. We don't read enough articles about developing "character," and about being the boss or coworker we'd like others to be to us.

So set your bar high

"Judge me not by my successes; judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."
From "The Long Walk To Freedom."

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