



Great Things Happen When We Focus on People, Not Money

Description

“We used to worry about money, and we lost it; now we worry about people, and we make it.”

Tom Badal, former environmental service manager at Holy Cross Hospital, Chicago, Illinois

Tom, who has since passed, summed it up very well. He made this statement during the mid-1990s, when a writer was at Holy Cross Hospital covering the huge turnaround we had experienced. Holy Cross had been named the Great Comeback Winner for large hospitals by *Modern Healthcare*. This recognition brought others to write about the hospital.

At the time, I was the senior vice president of Holy Cross. Mark Clement was the president/CEO. It was a thrilling time to be at Holy Cross. Prior to Mark’s arrival, the hospital had reported a loss of \$9 million and had a significant reduction in force. Mark was already righting the ship when I arrived.

Ironically, the fact that things were so bad at Holy Cross made change easier. The board of directors, the medical staff, and the employees all knew the future of the hospital was on the line.

I often think about what Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, said about good being the enemy of great. If one is good, there can still be reasons to change things, yet there’s not that sense of urgency. Another book that applies here is John Kotter’s *A Sense of Urgency*. My take is that if there is not the right amount of urgency, many times the needed change does not take place.

I have read and continue to read many books and articles on creating organizational excellence. For example, I keep Peter Drucker’s book *The Daily Drucker: 366 Days of Insight and Motivation for Getting the Right Things Done* on my desk. My observation is that not much is new. While we may use different terms to explain them, there are some basic fundamentals that we need to get right.

At times I have been much better at getting the basics right, and at times I have drifted. Some things have come quickly and some slowly.

I was recently asked, “When did it come together for you?” What the person was asking was when I knew what I wanted to do and got reasonably good at it. She was frustrated that she was not farther

ahead on her career path. At times she was not exactly sure what the path should be. The next day I sent her the story about Colonel Sanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC). He founded KFC when he was 65 years of age. My message was, "Don't be too hard on yourself."

I am reminded of the saying "what I learned after I thought I knew it all." For me it happened around my late 30s, when three key characteristics connected.

The first one to appear was *intelligence*. I'm not saying it happened consistently; however, by this time, I seemed to be able to figure out many things intellectually. The second was *work experience*. The more time I spent in roles, the better I became at them. It is that repetition Malcolm Gladwell describes in his book *Outliers*. The last item for me was *emotional maturity*.

Until all three of those were part of my daily living, I missed the mark more than I would have liked. They still play a key role in continuing to learn.

Tom Badal was way ahead of me the day he answered the question, "What is the difference between Holy Cross then and Holy Cross now?" If I had been asked that question, I would have laid out a bunch of steps: shared goal-setting, communication, training and development of leaders, reward and recognition, measurement, and so forth. Tom answered much more succinctly than I. That is because he understood the truth at the heart of what Holy Cross was doing: When an organization puts people first, financial performance takes care of itself.

What does it mean to focus on people? Yes, we can turn the organizational chart upside down to show the customer and frontline employees are at the top. We can say the words "servant leadership." But what I have learned over the course of my career is that people are very smart. It is what one does, not what one says. A quote I like is, "I judged myself on my intentions; others judged me on my behavior."

When I meet with groups of employees, I ask the question, "Who feels they have a good supervisor?" I then ask the people who raised their hands to share one thing about their supervisor that caused them to raise their hand. Number One is *My supervisor is approachable*. Number Two is *My supervisor works shoulder to shoulder with us when it's needed*. Number Three is *My supervisor does not ask me to do anything they will not do*.

There are many other factors that create a people-centric ecosystem, of course: It's coworkers, it's operations, it's a mastery of foundational skills, etc. However, those supervisor qualities are consistently in the top three. If those three are not pervasive throughout the organization, the trust will not be there to maximize the talent.

In looking back at what helped create Tom's feelings about people being the most important part of the hospital, it was not the words but the behavior.

Due to Mark's leadership, everyone was kept informed on what was going on and how the hospital was doing. It was a sense of trust that conveyed, "You are adults, and here are the facts." Staff involvement was paramount. Some may have felt we overdid it on teams to address issues; however, I would rather over-involve staff on solutions than under-involve.

We heard the managers were in too many meetings and not in the departments. We implemented “no meeting” times each day. These windows in the day gave managers time to be in the department where staff needed them. It was vital to build those relationships. Another important item was the investment in training. We knew people couldn’t be successful and fulfilled in their work if they didn’t have the skills needed to do the job. So we made training a priority.

Finally, a main item was what Tom said: The focus was not on money but on people. We did more recognition. We included employees in the hiring process. We had town hall meetings so people knew what was going on.

We celebrated milestones. For example, we held a hospital-wide celebration when we hit the 40th percentile in patient satisfaction. This may not sound like a lot, but considering that we had been in the single digits, it was actually pretty strong. We would celebrate the progress and then raise the bar, and eventually we hit the top 1 percentile in patient experience.

I learned so much from Tom. Rest in peace, my friend.

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