



## Reflections on Gratitude in the Wake of an Accident

### Description

On May 22, I was riding my bicycle when I was hit by a car. Fortunately, I was wearing a helmet. There were bystanders present to offer immediate help, and while I have injuries, it could have been so much worse.

We all have pauses in our lives. Sometimes we make our own decisions to pause, and at times there are external factors that create the pause for us. I think we have all seen that in a split second, life can dramatically change.

I think of how Tara Blackwell, who is an exceptional athlete, suffered a cervical spinal cord injury after a practice. She is now the founder of The Seven Project, which serves those living with physical disabilities and focuses on day-to-day quality-of-life enhancement through fitness, nutrition, and support. The family of Randy Ramos, CEO of Global Business Solutions, Inc., and a beloved community influencer, is navigating his sudden death. We all have to be aware of how fragile life is, and how things can change in just a few moments.

This accident got me thinking about how people deal with the disruptive events that pop up from time to time. It's great when we can learn from these disruptions and use them to get better and better as we move forward. I also sprinkled in a few leadership lessons as well.

Here are a few takeaways from my accident.

**Challenges can showcase the bright spots in our lives and in the community.** We live in a wonderful society where so many are willing to help. Individuals from the short film festival at Bartram Park did not pause a moment when they heard the sounds of the accident. They jumped in to help a fellow citizen without hesitation. A quick-responding police force secured the scene of the accident and kept others safe. There were wonderful first responders who arrived on the scene. There was a great local healthcare system. So many people in the community have reached out, offering kind words and support.

I've always tried to practice gratitude. But after listening to the amazing presenters who took part in the Gratitude Symposium throughout the month of May, my awareness around gratitude has been heightened even more.

As leaders, we're naturally trained to see what's wrong. At times we can forget to notice what's right, let alone recognize and celebrate it.

**Maximize every opportunity to let people know you care about them.** While things turned out okay this time, there could easily have been a different outcome. My friend John Myslak, who died at 54, taught me the value of telling the people I love how I feel. I have tried to do that. Now I will try even

more.

On December 24, 1995, my 19-year-old nephew, Brian Fitzpatrick, was killed in a car accident. There is no way a family heals, but there is one thing that offered them comfort. The last thing Brian's mother said to him as he was leaving the house that night was "I love you." We never know when will be the last night. Never miss an opportunity to tell someone you love them.

It's easy to take people for granted. Never assume those you care about know how you feel about them. Tell them now. This is why I'm such a big fan of rewarding and recognizing employees. Good people show up and do great things every day. Letting them know we appreciate and care about them is a huge relationship-builder.

**Negative events can be catalysts for positive change and/or obstacles can become opportunities.** We've been told for years that Pensacola streets are not safe for pedestrians and bikers. Pensacola is not alone in this; many cities lack safe spaces for bicycles and walkers. Hopefully this accident can be a catalyst for putting some energy toward fixing this issue.

We do this in the workplace too. We may not make improvements until a disruption or crisis forces us to. It's understandable. We are all busy. But when people get a reminder that something needs fixing, they make it a priority to act.

**Nothing happens in a vacuum.** It wasn't just my family impacted by this accident. The family of the man who was driving the car is also suffering. Life circumstances can, at times, cause all of us to behave in ways that we might not be proud of. It is my hope that we can extend empathy to this individual and his family. Empathy is a healing force for all involved.

As I wrote in last week's [column](#), empathy is deeply important. In fact, it is the number-one skill leaders need right now. We often have no idea what employees are going through. That's why we need to make a point to talk to them one-on-one, make it safe for them to tell the truth, and look for ways to ease their burdens.

This accident has reinforced a lot of truths that, like most people, I have trouble remembering day to day. The biggest reminder has been that when we have an attitude of gratitude, it helps us keep the hard stuff in perspective.

Thank you for all your thoughts, prayers, well wishes, and support over the past couple of weeks. I am grateful to be sharing this journey with all of you.

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