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People First

Did we need a slap?

Cold, hard realities are helping companies — and executives — get their priorities straight

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There's a different buzz in the air this holiday party season.

People seem more heartfelt when they greet each other. Their "how-are-you's" have taken on a more sincere tone, and they're accompanied by small acts of kindness.

It's tempting to chalk this all up to seasonal cheer. Or to the fact that, given the current economic crisis, we're all just happy to be among the group still standing. I'm hopeful, though, that this renewed gentility stems from a deeper source.

Last week, I met with Monica Coney, Vice President of Strategic Development at Smith Frank Partners, and we talked about this very thing. Monica thinks that Corporate America needed a slap to get its priorities straight. That during the past decade, companies had increasingly relied on the lure of glitz and glamour rather than civil, ethical, one-on-one interaction to build business relationships.

It's a fascinating observation.

The purpose of a slap is to make the recipient aware of its actions and, hopefully, prompt a review of the behaviors that led to the blow. The question becomes, then, can we as business leaders take this ongoing financial "slap" and use it to make our companies more aware of our impact on employees and key stakeholders? Can we learn to place a greater emphasis on the people around us? And can we, then, recapture that awareness in the form of greater customer satisfaction, partner approval and employee loyalty?

If we accept the premise that the business world needed a "time-out," we must, then, renew our focus on the "face" we put forward to the world through our behavior. Leadership expert Steven Covey Jr. once said that

“trust is the key to prosperity.” Do our corporate behaviors translate into trust?

The good news is that what the people around us really want most doesn't cost much. They crave straight talk. They're hungry to know what's really going on. They prize conversations that recognize who they are as people — and that acknowledge that their contributions have value. They want consistency. They seek a corporate culture that puts people first. They want to do business with people and companies that do what they say they'll do. They admire corporate leaders who say — and mean — that the buck stops here. They appreciate candor.

These are messages we've all heard before, so it's easy to write them off with a quick, “But I already do those things.” Before you do, I challenge you to ask yourself sincerely, “If I were watching me, would I trust me?”

Now is the time to take ourselves in hand and begin to lead — truly lead — by example. Now is the time to focus on getting the details right. Now is the time to smile. (Sincerely.) To listen. (Authentically.) To thank those around you. (In writing.) To ask for input. (And use it.) To admit mistakes. (Quickly.) To clean up your own messes. (Thoroughly.) To admit it when you don't know something. (To yourself and others.)

Practical polish

When I speak to business groups, the first question I ask is, “Who had a business lunch this week?” I then ask, “How many of you remember what your guest had to drink or how they ordered their food?” Far fewer hands get raised. The obvious question is, why? Recalling that information rightfully implies that you're paying the people around you the attention they deserve.

Along the same lines, I recently facilitated a dinner for C-level executives of Fortune 500 companies. There were 12 people at the table in a private room, and an expert on the financial markets was giving a presentation. One CEO spent the entire evening pushed back in his chair, clicking away on his BlackBerry.

His self-absorbed behavior telegraphed more than he ever realized. He clearly placed little value on anyone at the table. He was oblivious to the fact that he was distracting the others around him. I watched him and couldn't help but be embarrassed for him. No one is that important or self-sufficient, no matter how intelligent or talented they may be. If he was truly that busy, he should have declined the invitation or excused himself from the table.

It was the kind of behavior that tempted one to smack him. And it was exemplary of the types of collective behavior that well may have led to the financial slap we're sharing now.

For the sake of that CEO's company, and for the sake of our great nation, I'm keeping my fingers crossed that those of us in positions of leadership examine the behaviors and priorities that may have led us here.

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