

Thank You Darrel

You made a huge difference

Written by:

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At twenty-six years old, I was a Vietnam vet, had recently completed an undergrad science degree and was in my first professional position. I was a young manager in charge of a twenty person department at a manufacturing plant start-up. I was in over my head and I've always liked that.

My schooling in leadership/management was from Dad and later, the Army. Dad was an ex-Navy crew chief who was wounded at Pearl Harbor, recovered and went on the fight the air war in the Pacific theater. He was an entrepreneur, a Navy boxer and master of the command and control style of leadership. His approach was reinforced by my time in the Army.

I was now in charge of getting business results through others. This was before the term "team" was in the business lexicon and on paper, I did have authority over the group of union production and professional technical folks, but I was a punk. I was younger than many I had authority over, self-confident beyond reasonableness, reactionary and overall, too cool to fool.

I was getting reasonable results, yet everything I accomplished was more difficult than it should have been both for me and for those around me. When I finally did go home at the end of the day, more often than not I felt like kicking the dog. It seemed like the more intense I got, the less I accomplished and the more difficult it became. I was aggressive and ambitious – the bull in the china shop. While I had the technical aspects of my job in spades, I simply did not have the leadership perspective or skills.

Darrel was my boss. He was relatively new in the job. He joined from outside the company and was a quick study. He saw my rough edges right away and, more importantly for me and the business, he saw through these rough edges.

One day, we had a long lunch. He held up a mirror and made sure that I accurately saw what the mirror reflected. I did not like what I saw. He was so skilled that it was simply not possible for me to ignore what was in the mirror.

There was no threat. No ultimatum. Instead, we had a discussion led by thoughtful, tough questions directed at me about me and what I wanted out of life, my job and career. He painted a clear and powerful picture of how my rough edges were keeping me from getting what I wanted and how that played out through my employees and the business. This did not feel like a disciplinary discussion because it focused on growth and development. Still, I knew changes were essential to my success.



I don't know that any one aspect of the discussion was more important or powerful than another. The fact is I was light on self-awareness. Darrel expanded my perspective and offered me help. Now, thirty years later, I think of him with gratitude. He steered me to an intensive personal leadership development program that took place one evening a week for several months. He attended my graduation and continued to mentor. The business invested a significant percent of my annual salary in the program and in me. This was my first professional job and my first real experience with a mentor who was not a parent, grandparent or school teacher. I was dumbfounded that both Darrel and the company had that much faith in me.

I am guessing he is probably retired now. I have no idea where he is and he probably has no idea of the impact he had on my life but I am guessing he has a legacy of growing other leaders.

You're a leader, the one in charge, the place where the buck stops. Here are a few "look in the mirror" questions.

- Instruments of production, human resources or human beings – what are the characteristics of your interactions with those you lead?
- In what ways would those who you lead say that their capability, performance and lives have improved as a result of working with you?
- Who in your history as a leader might think of you as they read this.
- What actions are you going to take in the next year to help people you lead become their absolute best?



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