

Human Resource Nightmares



MOST COMPANIES ARE AS PREDICTABLE AS people. Especially big companies. Whenever an employee town meeting is scheduled early in the week, it's usually a sign they have good news for the workers. Whenever the news is not so good, the town meeting happens late in the day on Friday. It was the same this time around.

For weeks the rumor mills had been working overtime as the company decided who would succeed the current CEO when he retired. Narrowed to two inside candidates, the contrast couldn't have been greater. Marge was a no-nonsense ladder-climber whose driven nature made even workaholics shiver. Known for a sharp mind and an even sharper tongue, she used both to make big impressions inside and outside the firm. It was no secret nobody liked working for her or with her, but there was also no denying she got results. Despite the absence of people skills, there was no denying she had the Midas touch. Even her enemies grudgingly acknowledged her success. Kate, on the other hand, fit the role of the "tortoise" in the hare-and-tortoise story. Her climb through the company was steady, but slow, marked by solid successes and distinctive profit turnarounds. Twenty years older than Marge, Kate was immensely popular with the rank and file, and turnover among her staff was always nearly zero.

While Marge frequently used people (and often used them up) and then discarded them, Kate spent long hours coaching even the most unproductive workers. Kate paid

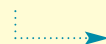
little attention to touting her own achievements, and when pressed often cited the work of others, behavior that endeared her to her staff. Marge cared little for what her team thought of her, but spent a lot of time and energy making sure the senior staff knew about her, even if it meant occasionally leaving the impression she was responsible for a particular success when someone else really deserved the credit. Marge's motto, repeated often in staff meetings, was "perception is everything, reality is nothing." Kate didn't have a motto.

So it was no secret nearly every worker in the firm was rooting for Kate to win out when the board selected its new leader. And it was no surprise when the workers issued a collective sigh when the announcement was scheduled for a Friday afternoon. The words didn't even need to be said: Marge was the new leader.

For this reason the building reverberated with the old Leo Durocher quote about nice guys finishing last. It just seemed like Kate was being penalized for doing things the right way.

Imagine yourself as Kate's advisor early in her business career. Knowing what you now know about the company's decision, what advice would you offer a younger Kate that might change the results?

Should she change the results? Why or why not.



Scripture Passages

I Samuel 1:1-20
Nehemiah 4:1-16

In Depth

In the first set of five lessons from this study we outlined a path for moving from a life driven by ambition and self-centeredness to a life centered on our relationship with God, and characterized by a righteous perspective that introduces a healthy work ethic into its mix. In this next set of five lessons our goal is to move from the moral relativity that characterizes our culture (and most, if not all, cultures throughout history), to a place where others see in us a steadfast character directly attributable to our relationship with God.

The first step in this process is the realization that a steadfast character is not driven by circumstances and does not alter itself to fit a particular era or culture. Character today is defined in precisely the same way in which character has always been defined—by the standards set by the Creator.

Perhaps nothing challenges our commitment to our faith more than difficult people, and this is especially true in our workplaces. We all have tales of bad bosses, obnoxious customers, and backstabbing coworkers. Not only do they make life miserable for us in our work lives, but they also present a challenge to our faith. So how should Christian workers be equipped to resist the urge to bend our character when faced with these human resource nightmares? What steps can we take to resist reacting in a manner inconsistent with our faith? The following two stories from Scripture yield important “life ideas” that are useful building blocks en route to a steadfast character.

I. Responding to opposition from “the enemy” and doubt from “the team”

Read Nehemiah 4:1-16. What tactics did Sanballat and Tobias use in verses 1-3 to try to keep Nehemiah from accomplishing his objective?

Ridicule can often disable even the strongest person. In what way is the ridicule of Sanballat and Tobias similar to ridicule you’ve experienced from difficult people you meet in your workplace?

In verses 4-5, what strategy does Nehemiah employ in overcoming the effects of ridicule on his people?

What effect do you think it had on the builders when their leader cried out to God for help? What effect do you think it had on Nehemiah?

Often the purpose of ridicule is to make a worthwhile act seem useless or hopeless. In this instance it threatened the ability of the builders and Nehemiah to remain motivated enough to get the task at hand accomplished. Nehemiah's leadership genius wasn't built on making people believe in him, but rather in reminding them who was really in charge. How can that idea help you when you're facing ridicule in the workplace?

In verses 7-12 Sanballat and Tobias use another tactic commonly found in the workplace. What is it?

All too often difficult people make use of anger, fear or intimidation when ridicule fails. In fact, anger, fear and intimidation are often default tools in a manager's toolbox, especially when the manager is feeling threatened or insecure. How do you respond to fear and intimidation from coworkers or managers?

In these same verses (7-12) the comments of the Jewish people who were not participating in the rebuilding of the wall are recorded. These people were adding to the fears of Nehemiah's team with their gossip and naysaying. Who are the parallel characters to these naysayers and gossips in your workplace?

How does Nehemiah respond to these threats?

Describe the effect you think Nehemiah's unyielding confidence had on his team. What is the source of his confidence?

What advice does this offer you for being able to face opposition to your own efforts to do your work the way God wants? What actions can you take to resist the temptation to yield to those who say you should bend or change?

When we understand we exist to be in relationship with God, and all we do serves (or undermines) that relationship, it becomes easier for us to turn to Him for help when faced with the weapons wielded by difficult people in our work lives.

II. Reacting to criticism

Read I Samuel 1:1-20. What did Hannah want?

How do these men and women make life difficult for Hannah?

- Elkanah, her husband

- Peninnah, her husband's other wife

- Eli, the priest in the temple

We see in this account Hannah not only endured the frustration of unfulfilled hopes, prayers, goals, dreams, (use whatever word you want to here), but her competitor

(Peninnah) taunted her, and Elkanah failed to understand her. Then, on top of that, God's representative on the spot misunderstood her and accused her of being drunk. Seems like she ought to be able to exercise a little righteous anger here, doesn't it? She should be able to vent at Eli, right? How would you characterize her response?

How do you think it was possible for her to respond respectfully, and what effect did it have on Eli's response to her?

In verse 18 we see Hannah's demeanor is no longer downcast. What changed her? It can't be that God answered her prayer, because that doesn't happen until later in the passage, and nothing in Scripture tells us He promised to answer her specific prayer request. So then, what did change her demeanor?

The answer gets at the fundamental purpose of prayer. Most Christians assume prayer is necessary for God to know what they're thinking or what they need, even though we already know He's omniscient. Since God already sees and knows everything that's going on in our lives, prayer must be for our sake, not His.

In fact, prayer's primary purpose is to serve as a tangible reminder to us of God's existence, and secondarily, as a way for us to acknowledge His supremacy over all things. Hannah's attitude changed not because she got a promise from God, and not because she told Him something He didn't already know, but rather because her prayer life reminded her God was in control, and He loved her enough to listen when she prayed. This encounter with God, available to all of us, equipped Hannah to deal with the difficult people in her life, and it can do so for us as well.

During Hannah's prayers in the temple, notice what she offered God if He granted her request. What does that say about how we should pray when seeking God's blessing on our own goals, wants, or dreams?

We must remember we exist to be in relationship with God and acknowledge Christ bought us with His sacrifice. That means even the results of answered prayers belong to God. When God gives us what we ask for, we must be willing to give it back, or give it to others, when He commands.

Abraham learned this when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. Solomon learned this when he asked for wisdom, and even here, when Hannah's heart's desire is to know the joy of motherhood, she recognizes God's gift of a child means child must also be offered up for use by God in His redemptive work.

Later in Scripture we discover God did bless Hannah with a child—a son. That son, Samuel, grew up to play an important role in the kingdom of Israel. So, while God answered Hannah's prayers by giving her the desire of her heart, He also filled a need in the life of Israel by making that son a leader in the nation of Israel. What does this suggest to us about how God views the pieces of the puzzles of life?

How does the recognition God deals in an eternal economy help us maintain our spiritual and professional equilibrium in the face of disappointment and criticism?

What would you **describe as** the “life idea” for handling criticism and preparing ourselves to respond to it appropriately?

As we strive to be men and women of steadfast character, we must work to exhibit that character in good times and bad. Among the most difficult challenges to our character is opposition and criticism from others. How we react to those challenges tells others a great deal about the depth and sincerity of our faith. It tells us as well.

Who are your biggest critics at work? List some of them here.

Now talk to God about them, asking for His wisdom in dealing with them, and if necessary, for His strength in enduring them. Then pray for them.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Difficult people are an inevitable part of every workplace. The grass is seldom really greener on the other side of the fence.
- Ridicule, fear and intimidation are the tools of mean-spirited people, and Christians in particular should avoid using them as weapons in the workplace.
- The key to handling difficult people, overcoming criticism, resisting the discouragement that comes from ridicule, or living tentatively in the face of threats is to have an eternal focus that only comes from constant interaction with God.
- Far too often *we* are the naysayers and gossips in the lives of other Christians facing monumental tasks or difficult circumstances. God is not glorified—nor is He pleased—when that is true.
- How we respond to difficult people may be precisely the thing God wants others in our circle of influence to see. Handling human resource nightmares with an eye towards eternity may give us the patience to turn the circumstance around temporally, or it may simply be another seed planted in the minds of others about God's effect on our lives. Either way He is glorified by our effort.
- What we ask for from God remains His to use, even when He decides to give it to us.
- Praying reminds us God is real. It also reminds us He is supreme.