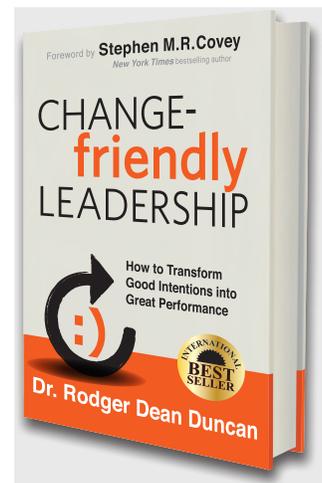


Section

ONE

BONUS•POINTS



Leadership By Walking Around

By Dr. Rodger Dean Duncan

Joseph Solymossy is a tough-minded man with a soft heart. That's not to say he's touchy-feely. A Naval Academy graduate and retired Navy captain, Joe spent several decades in the nuclear energy business. He's all about getting results.

Joe's a smart guy. He knows that everyone in his industry has the same good technology. So the performance differentiator is people – the men and women the public trusts to operate nuclear plants so they are safe and reliable.

Joe knows that getting “the people stuff” right is always critical – especially so in an environment where the margin for error is somewhere south of zero. So he works hard at staying close to his people and ensuring that they, in turn, stay close to theirs.

In a recent meeting with his senior staff, Joe taught a principle that's pertinent to any leader in any venue. He used a parable, sort of a modern version of one of Aesop's fables. Here's the story that Joe told his people:

A farmer who had been losing money year after year went to a banker. He asked for a loan to keep the farm open for another year. The banker reluctantly agreed, saying “I can no longer afford to lose money on you. Either you show a profit this year or we will repossess the farm.”

Upon leaving the bank with a new loan, the farmer was confronted by a panhandler who asked the farmer if he needed help. The farmer said he needed a lot of luck to get through the coming year. The panhandler offered the farmer a lucky stone for a small price, payable at the end of the year. The panhandler said the payment was required only if the farm did indeed turn a profit. The farmer, seeing that he couldn't lose, asked for the conditions of the agreement. The panhandler said the stone is effective only if the farmer walked his property every day with the stone in his pocket. The farmer, willing to try anything, took the stone and went home.

The next morning, the farmer walked his fence line and realized that ten of his cattle had wandered through a broken fence. He rounded up the cattle, herded them back into the field, and repaired the fence.

The following morning he found a fox hole and laid a trap for the fox. The fox was caught. That evening, the farmer and his wife enjoyed a fine meal of fox stew.



On the third day he found a hole in the chicken coop and repaired it to keep his chickens in.

On the next day he spotted some soil erosion and placed rocks near the area to keep the soil from wasting away.

Day after day, he walked his property with the stone in his pocket and, day after day, he corrected what needed to be corrected.

At the end of the year, the farmer went to the banker and informed him that it was the most profitable year ever. The banker, pleased by the farmer's new-found prosperity, asked him how he did it. "I didn't do anything," the farmer said. "I had a magic rock."

Upon leaving the bank, the panhandler asked the farmer how the year went. The farmer told him it was the best year he'd ever had. The farmer paid the panhandler for the lucky rock and said he would carry the stone with him every day until he died. The panhandler confessed that the rock wasn't lucky, it was simply that the farmer was finally doing the things he should have been doing all along – inspecting his work spaces.

What's the moral of the story? To be profitable, you must inspect your spaces. This means prioritizing inspections above some of the other fun things you love to do (like meetings and paperwork). It means being where the workers are and observing not only *what* they do but *how* they do it. It also means that you must correct and coach people on the spot and help them develop ways to perform their stewardships better. Failing to do so will result in your people continuing to make the same costly mistakes over and over.

Once people understand they will be inspected frequently, they perform better and your organization will prosper. While some organizations have developed formal inspection programs, these programs often resort to an administrative requirement to get the assessment done. The inspection becomes ineffective when the priority of getting the assessment done (ticking off items on a check list) seems more important than the quality of the inspection. It is only when managers and supervisors truly have the practice of regularly checking on the quality of work that the quality will be maintained.

Genuine quality cannot be forced or administered. It must come from an inner desire to improve the performance of your workers.

First, can you see the wisdom in using that parable? You can teach practices all day long, but they rarely stick until people understand the underlying principles. A parable or story is a great way to teach

principles in a human, memorable way.

And what about this particular story? It underscores the critical importance of what some may call leadership by wandering around. This is of course not mindless wandering. It's wandering with a purpose.

The intent of leadership by wandering around is not to usurp the authority or position of middle managers or supervisors. The point, in fact, is that middle managers and supervisors should be doing it themselves! Cascading sponsorship and cascading leadership are necessary for organizational effectiveness. The idea is simply to "walk the fences" so you can maintain a first-hand feel for what people are thinking, which processes are helping and which are getting in the way, and how the organization's key leadership messages come out after being filtered by several layers of bureaucracy.



Here are only four of the many advantages of leadership by walking around:

It keeps you in tune. A lot goes on in your organization, and you certainly won't learn it all in your

routine staff meetings and email exchanges. An excellent way to stay tuned to the “frequency” of your people is to *go where they are*. If you want to learn what’s really going on in the customer service department, don’t just invite the department head to your office for an explanation. Walk down to the customer service department and ask for a guided tour and a chance to observe for yourself.

It increases communication.

When your motive is pure, people will quickly discover that your purpose is to learn and coach rather than to entrap and criticize. Then they will regard your “walking around” as a safe opportunity to discuss things that are genuinely pertinent to their performance. You won’t come across as a threat. You’ll be regarded as a helpful resource. Remember—open communication is the lubricant that keeps your organization running smoothly.

It gives serendipity a chance to work. Did you ever read a book or stroll through a shop or engage in a casual conversation and discover something useful that you weren’t even looking for? That’s serendipity. Serendipity can’t work if you aren’t *there*. Besides, people seem to be more comfortable on their own turf. And when they’re comfortable, they’re more likely to share information and insight that will contribute to your own big picture.

It provides teaching – and learning – moments. There are few things more powerful than catching your people doing good. When you see someone performing a task well,



commend them on the spot. Be specific. Don’t just tell them they’re doing good work. Point out specifically what they are doing well and remind them of the important linkages

to other people’s work. And when you notice an error of either omission or commission, correct that on the spot too. (If you’re the “big boss,” it’s usually best to mention the matter privately to the employee’s immediate manager to avoid undermining the manager’s own authority.)

“*You can rent a person’s back and hands, but you must win his head and heart.*”

In working with management teams in a wide range of organizations I’m frequently amazed by how otherwise capable people so often neglect the easy—and smart—practice of leading by walking around. Somehow they think they can keep an accurate pulse on their organizations by confining their intelligence-gathering to spreadsheets, staff meetings and PowerPoint presentations. Those sources may help track trends, but they lack the living and breathing data that comes only from talking with people in the trenches.

My friend Tim Bays, a Nashville singer and songwriter, has a little ditty that goes like this:

***The important part of fishin’
aint the fish, it’s the fishin’,
The important part of lovin’
is the love.***

***The important part of doin’
most anything you’re doin’
Is doin’ it with all of your heart.***

You’ve heard it from me before: You can rent a person’s back and hands, but you must *win* his head and heart.

Joe Solymossy and other good leaders understand what that means. It means supplementing the hard data of numbers and graphs with the soft data of people’s feelings and opinions. It means leaving the comfort of your swivel chair and getting out among the people who know things about your organization that you may never have dreamed. It means creating an atmosphere in which people feel safe in asking questions that even you might not think to ask.

Leadership is not about the title on your business card. True leadership is about the way you connect with real people doing real work. It’s about how you provide resources needed to get the job done. It’s about removing road blocks and speed bumps so your people can use the ingenuity and skill they were hired to use.

Leadership by walking around is an excellent way for you to add value to your people’s value.