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Our Universities: People, Purpose, Principle

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Our Universities: People, Purpose, Principle

Fourth in a series on Corporate Culture...

Rules without relationships guide organizations to mediocrity at best and in the worst case to the lowest common denominator. Relationships rule.

“The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual.”

Vince Lombardi

Great organizations are guided at once by deep principles, personal relationships, and some rules. Rules must govern relationships and support principles but the healthiest cultures put relationships first. I am not talking about the poisoned well of *quid pro quos* or patronage. Those are chokeholds not relationships.

I had the opportunity to visit Herb Kelleher a number of years ago at Love Field in Dallas, the home of *Southwest Airlines*: His baby. My compatriot and I had a mission, to get a sense of his vision for organizational effectiveness. We were reflecting on what a potent university might look like in the next few decades.

Herb — everybody from the baggage handlers, to the ticket agents, to the flying public called him Herb — was as memorable as any person I ever met. He chain-smoked cigarettes, littering the floor of his office with ashes. In fact, he picked us up from a plane in his black Mercedes Benz. I rode in the back seat. It too was covered with ashes that he unsuccessfully flicked out the window.

When we arrived at his office he offered us a drink. Usually I offer people coffee or water when they come to my office. Not Herb. Wild Turkey. Glass in hand, cigarette dangling from mouth, he talked for an hour, nonstop, to two university professors about what makes organizations work.

I can’t remember a word he said. Not one.

It wasn’t the cigarette smoke or the smell of booze in the air. It’s what happened when we started to meet people that fogged my memory. Herb’s passion and compassion for the people at *Southwest Airlines* was overpowering. The expert litigator and business entrepreneur said nothing of significance in comparison to the way he treated the people that worked with him.
And nobody worked for Herb Kelleher, but with him.

I remember nearly everything that happened on the tour. He talked to everyone. He asked them how they were doing. In many cases, specific questions about families, husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, children, their neighborhoods, their cars — I distinctly remember him asking somebody about the alternator in their Chevy — all manner of things related to the people that powered Southwest Airlines. Herb knew the people. And through this interpersonal passion, he reinforced the idea that all were in this together, and the only job that matters, is that everyone help passengers get from Dallas to somewhere. Together.

When organizations become large the need for rules to guide principle and purpose may overtake the importance of personal relationships. On reflection, it seems Herb Kelleher believed the paramount principle of Southwest Airlines was the well-being of whomever he was talking with.

Imagine a university attempting to serve 20,000, 30,000, or 40,000 students with 6,000, 7,000, or 8,000 workers of every stripe imaginable, and that each worker does not understand who they are in relationship to the larger organization. Personal relationships allow the power of the Delphic Maxim, “Know thyself” to flourish. That awareness provides the liberty to find out who others are. Such perspective creates a culture where all members are important to each other and to purpose simultaneously.

Imagine working in a place that believes everyone should satisfy their own needs first, or conversely, that corporate, institutional, or organizational needs should top everybody’s list. Greed on the one hand, tyranny on the other: each devalues people. Each creates fear as people lose identity, and Herb says, “A company is stronger if it is bound by love rather than by fear.” Fear won’t provide the opportunity to know that some poor guy on the baggage ramp has an alternator in his ‘84 Chevy on the fritz.

Rules do not create productive cultures, relationships do.

Our best universities thrive when founded on human relationships, with a few rules, that value people, purpose, and principle, in nearly equal measure. But, people are always first.