

What Matters to People
By George M. Prince

"The price of freedom is eternal vigilance."(Thomas Jefferson) and will continue to be for the foreseeable future.

One of the more remarkable migrations of history is that which began in 1603 when the pilgrims left the old world to start the new.

Although many people have given a great deal to make this country the remarkable place it is, it is difficult to explain the unprecedented effectiveness of those fugitives from the established safety of their roots. One of the interesting factors in the rise of the new world is that the rigid hierarchical procedures of the old world were left in the old world. (As new arrivals moved away from the Puritan dominating ways.)

As people became aware that the old established custom of inherited social position was no longer valid, it became necessary to develop new, more respectful ways of dealing with each other. People could no longer be ordered around.

As a result, while there were still substantial differences in means, the old titles and inherited positions of power-over no longer bound people in their places. If it became too demeaning, one could pick up and "go west". People gradually began to deal with each other more as equals than ever before. The unguessed at consequence was that people felt more meaningful, and liked the feeling. They took responsibility for themselves, cultivated their potentials, and became more effective as people. (The blight of slavery on the early south reinforces the concept that freedom activates a potential).

The explosion in initiative and productive adventure began to differentiate the new world from the old. Another revolutionary invention that came out of this change in self regard, was democracy. This was an expression and reinforcement of a new social order of equality: in a very large sense, this new form of government reflected a respect for the common man never experienced before; respect for individual meaningfulness my vote counts as much as that of the richest man in the land.

These are surprising consequences to come out of the unplanned granting of meaningfulness on a wide scale. This creative and perhaps unconscious, honoring of one of the invisible needs of the human animal the need to feel meaningful explains so many of the differences in the original American way.

One of the increasing problems in the U.S. is that we are tempted to follow the corporate model of operating. The old world hierarchical structure. Power is seductive, and the present structure of most operations seems to encourage the exercise of power by those in charge of even the lowliest of departments, let alone those in the top floor corner offices. It is tempting because U.S. corporations seem effective the workers continue to retain the self-reliance of their forbears and seem to be delivering. What is

only dimly realized by an insightful few, is that if we reoriented ourselves to model our companies after the democratic process, where we deal as equals (even though powerful corporations use lobbying to gain unfair advantage), we would see a leap in effectiveness. By paying informed attention to the need for meaningfulness we could liberate potential that is withheld, many times unconsciously, to defend against disrespect.

This focus on meaningfulness is not based on the seemingly tenuous connection to the rise of equality in the new world, or idle speculation. In recent years, research into how the brain operates, and into the effect of various child-rearing practices, has demonstrated that the need to feel and be meaningful is fundamental to well being and actualization of potential. Hard wired into our brains is a mechanism that is alert to threat mechanism that has made it possible for us to survive from ancient times¹. This warning system registers any threat. It does differentiate between a threat to life and a threat to meaningfulness only in degree. In either case, the person is impelled to take defensive action. When it is a disrespectful action, particularly by a boss, the cortex the thinking part of the brain is consulted, and appropriate caution is exercised. Retaliation will be less obvious: a slow-down, unwitting sabotage, mistake proneness, or other action to demonstrate: "I am meaningful." If the disrespect is repeated, or continuous, there is produced a state of prejudice against. Every action by the powerful one will be viewed as negative, or at least, suspect.

This extreme sensitivity to disrespectful treatment begins very early in life when, as infants, we require invested attention, assuring us of our meaningfulness, or we die. Infants placed in institutional care where they are well fed and protected from disease, but deprived of loving attention, still perish at an alarming rate ².

The destructive effect of harsh treatment of children has been well established. These mistreated young people become hypersensitive to any slight or imagined sign of disrespect. Road rage and wife battering are traced to such early damage. Not so well known is that simple neglect produces much the same damage as overt mistreatment.

A limited experiment with 2nd graders in a public school suggests some possibilities. These were 24 fairly typical 7-year-old children in a middle class neighborhood. They were noisy, pushed and shoved getting on the bus, yelled in the hall, and in first grade were the usual problem in keeping order. There were 4 special needs children, who needed specialized teachers to help them with the various difficulties they were having. Two had serious behavior problems in that they would attempt to disrupt the class proceedings by talking and wandering around.

The teacher, with an outside consultant who had been doing research on the effect of disrespectful actions, designed the learning experience with great emphasis on respect for the children and their capacities. Virtually every decision was made in consultation with them. For example, on the first class, they gathered on the floor in the front of the room before an easel pad. The teacher, crayon in hand asked, "Now, what do we want

to learn this year?" The result was a list of everything they could possibly study that year.

Next, she said, "We want to have a lot of fun this year, and at the same time we don't want to disturb the classes next to us. What can we do to make sure we do not get too noisy?"

Hands went up and ideas were offered. The process agreed upon was that anyone observing too much noise would hold up two fingers in the V for Victory sign. As others see this, they hold up their fingers too. If this does not work, the observer switches the lights on and off. This system was used effectively all year.

In this mutual problem solving way the class dealt with every problem. They solved everything from the problem of bullying, to orderly behavior in the halls, to taking turns getting on the bus.

The teacher, together with the parents of the special needs children decided to eliminate outside help that differentiated these children. Since the children organized their daily assignments and carried them out in groups of three or four (of their own selection), the teacher was free to give special help where needed.

In the case of the problem behavior children, the teacher appreciated positive actions and ignored distracting behavior. The rest of the children ignored distracting behavior. They were busy with their tasks. By the end of the year, the four special needs children had found themselves and no longer presented any problems. In four year follow up, these children stayed found.

Moving toward grown-ups we observe some students at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The class is focusing on landscape architecture and has been assigned the task of landscaping a large neglected estate that is being remodeled as a college building. The class is divided into two equal teams of 12. One team is taught Brainstorming, an effective idea getting process; the other is trained in Syntectics, another idea getting process that has a large component of training in respectful interactions.

At the end of the year, four professional landscape architects are invited to judge the two results. The unanimous decision is in favor of the group trained in respectful interactions.

And now, an example from the real world:

John Gottman, a psychologist, operated a marriage research laboratory over a 30 year period. He videotaped, to observe actions, and attached devices to measure vital signs as a couple lived together in a weekend laboratory apartment. He discovered that when there was more than one disrespectful action for every five of appreciation, the marriage

would not last. The worst offenders: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, stonewalling, and belligerence. He could observe a couple for two hours and predict, with 95% accuracy whether the relationship would last⁶.

A manager who intuited the remarkable influence of respect for his workers, designed his operations to honor meaningfulness. Tom Melohn⁷ purchased a small manufacturing plant and methodically changed the emotional field. He gave himself the title of Head Sweeper and did away with the traditional hierarchy of management. He installed a system of high authority, respect, and responsibility for each employee. His results are impressive: Sales up 28% each year, productivity up 480%, and pre-tax profit up 2400%.

There is other evidence, all very one sided in support of the effectiveness of conscious attention to respect for the meaningfulness of all involved. It is impressive that given this well documented knowledge about what makes all the difference in assuring productive human relations, the designers of companies are still prejudiced toward the old world practices that have historically led to such widespread emotional desertion. There is a powerful need to be treated with respect. Those couples and managers who have had the vigilance to observe this, have invented ways to avoid disrespect and honor meaningfulness, and are reaping the rewards.

References

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