

THOUGHTS ON EXCELLENT LEADERSHIP

by Karl Pister



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Never Put Off

If 'larger than life' can sum up an individual, it is Otto. Let me describe why....

He was the first CEO that I ever knew, and he set an incredibly high bar for all the executives I have met since.

I don't know if there was anything that he thought he couldn't do. Not in an arrogant way, but in a 'bring it on' sort of way.

With just a small cadre of fellow mental health professionals, he built an Employee Assistance Program organization that soon expanded to national prominence from a small beginning in Salt Lake City. Most of us that worked with him had very little business experience, but that didn't deter him from giving assignments that were absolutely stretch assignments with the full confidence that we could work it out. And we did!





Otto was overseas doing some work with another superb mentor of mine when I first came to the organization. By the time I met him, I had heard so much about him.

The first meeting was memorable. Ramrod straight posture, at probably 6'3", he was impeccably dressed in his standard outfit of crisply pressed button-down white shirt, Levis, and cowboy boots. And he was a true cowboy. He had a buffalo ranch in the southwest part of the Salt Lake Valley. And he worked the herd, his hayfields, and his livestock.

A couple of times a summer, if we wanted to, we all left the corporate life behind to go tend to the herd, bale hay, bring in the hay, and take care of other ranch duties for the day. We didn't need team-building activities. We worked hard in the Utah summer heat and it carried over to our company work. I have rarely experienced an environment to equal this esprit-de-corp.

I can close my eyes and see his corner office. Very unpretentious. Comfortable leather chairs and I was sitting in one. We were talking about some topic and he said the phrase, way ahead of the common popularity, *"I can teach any skill...I can't teach attitude"*.

I heard that thirty-seven years ago, and it is as vivid as if it happened this morning.



His generosity was amazing. Every year we had a company meeting in VERY nice places...Amelia Island...Hotel del Coronado...Snowbird. We could have just stayed at corporate, but he wanted to reward us with a primo experience. He led from the front, and charged hard...But I never remember resenting long hours or tight deadlines.

When the boss shows up at one in the morning when you are pulling a late-nighter to get a proposal out the door, who can complain?

I had only been with the company a little over two years when a huge company, noting our niche success, bought us. I have no idea what the sale price was. But I do remember Otto pulling me aside in the hall and handing me a check, and with emotion in his voice, thanking me for all of my contributions to the organization.

Not quite sure, even to this day, what I had done to contribute to the level that check indicated....but I will never forget the impact it had for our young family.

A year after the buyout, while flying back east for another conference, Otto was up in the front and I wandered up to talk to him. The meeting was basically a 'transfer of power' meeting, where he was being relieved of the CEO duties. It was his last trip for the company. I remember him saying, *"it took me a while to realize that they had bought us and we hadn't bought them"*.



That conference was a bit less rewarding than others, since we realized that there was an end of an era upon us. While the buyout provided amazing opportunities, bureaucracy began to replace entrepreneurial thinking, the energy level seemed to drop over time, and it was the first time I realized what one person's influence can do from the front.

I moved from the corporate office to a field assignment a few years later and then moved beyond the company after that. However, what those four entrepreneurial years taught me influence me to this day.

The energy, the indomitable spirit, the constant presence was engraved on my inexperienced self at a key time.

That is the background. Now onto today.

Last fall a key mentor for me, who was part of my early leadership learning, let me know that Otto wasn't doing well. I sent some immediate texts and soon had a visit arranged. However, when the day arrived, he wasn't up to a visit. There were other opportunities that subsequently slipped through the cracks for 'good' reasons at the time, that with this morning's message, now seem worthless.

At 9 AM this morning, a close friend texted the message:

Otto passed away this morning. No details yet but I will keep you posted.



Now bear in mind that I had not spoken with him in nearly thirty-four years. Knowing his family and the close network of friends that he had nurtured over the years, he undoubtedly was surrounded by those that knew and loved him when he passed.

I am fairly confident that Otto did not lead a lesser life because I did not make it out to his house to see him. However, I have reflected, over the past six hours, what was missed by not going.

I know how I would have felt as I left his house, having let him know how he impacted me and how that impact has touched many in my path.

There is something powerful in expressing gratitude, especially to those that have played a key role in one's development. It closes loops. It fortifies the realization, coined best by Newton, who stated:

If it is that I see further, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants...

It fosters humility, insight, and appreciation.

My point with all of this is that I hope that my loss by putting things off will lend to your gain.

As you read this today, on August 1st, before the end of the day, I want you to consider who the 'Otto' is in your life. Who



has made an impact? Who has left you a better person? What do you need to tell them?

And before the week is out, that would be August 7th, I want you to have made contact with that person. And, being fairly traditional about such things, emails and texts don't count. Anyone can do that.

I mean a pick-up-the-phone or get-in-your-car type of effort to have the chance to, voice-to-voice or face-to-face, close those loops of life that life often presents to us, but that we put off for a variety of fairly weak reasons.

What does all this have to do with the leadership themes that permeate these writings?

Let me provide a short list:

The expression of gratitude builds humility which is essential for strong leadership

Being aware of the needs of others is a key pillar to emotionally intelligent leadership

Learning to act on those small 'nudges' that come to your mind will provide you immense opportunities to build relationships that go far beyond the moment

And most importantly, it is the right thing to do, which should be the foundational principle of all we do as leaders.



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