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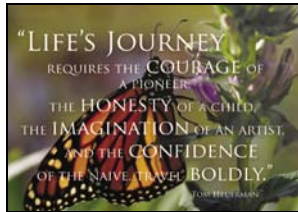
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North Dakota Nice (Formerly known as Minnesota Nice)

People grow in places where honesty can be counted on and where integrity and appropriate assertiveness are expected and rewarded.

And people need to be cared about enough that they will not be allowed to get away with being dishonest, manipulative, irresponsible, or passive-aggressive.

Carol Pearson

A case study in passive-aggressive behavior.

By all accounts, Robert Potts, until recently the chancellor of the North Dakota University System, is a good person and a terrific leader.

But Potts is out of a job.

Trouble began about 1 ½ years ago, when politically connected North Dakota State University president Joseph Chapman and the presidents of two smaller state colleges came to a legislative session with their own agendas rather than supporting the goals of the North Dakota University System.

Chancellor Potts told the presidents to “cease and desist” supporting a bill that would give their schools more money. He threatened to hold them accountable if they didn’t. Potts put his issue on the table and dealt with it; that is good leadership—direct and straightforward.

(If three company presidents tried to undercut the corporate CEO in the business world, they would be out of a job—right now. The first problem in this drama is that the leader, Potts, did not have the

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authority to lead, which left the door wide open for passive-aggressive political treachery.)

Potts's actions set off a pattern of passive-aggressive intrigue suitable for study by students of leadership and human dynamics everywhere.

Passive-aggressive behavior (called "Minnesota Nice" where I live) is the expression of anger and aggression in passive ways to frustrate the wishes of others—often bosses. Examples of passive-aggressive behaviors are: procrastination, fibbing and forgetfulness, and criticizing leaders behind their backs.

Passive-aggressive folks resist change. These people smile to your face and stab you in the back when you are not around. When confronted, they blame others for their behavior. All of us are passive resisters at times. At times passively resisting something or someone can be a perfectly rational strategy—just not a way of life.

Mostly passive-aggressive people are a pain in the ass. They irritate us. That is their intent.

Look for the behaviors in this drama.

According to news reports:

Chapman stopped communicating with Potts after Potts confronted him (more grounds for dismissal), but he talked a lot to the governor and members of the state Board of Higher Education (still more grounds for dismissal). Chapman told Governor John Hoven that he was unhappy. Hoven told Chapman he would have to meet Potts halfway.

Governor Hoven met with two board members to discuss getting Potts and Chapman to work together. Why didn't the governor sit down with Potts and Chapman? That would have been leadership.

Two board members said Hoven told them he was dissatisfied with Potts. Did Governor Hoven ever tell Potts he was unhappy with him? Apparently not as Potts said he had no indication that Hoven was unhappy with him and was disappointed in how the governor handled the situation.

Meanwhile, some board members criticized Potts informally. Those with different allegiances did not talk to one another. One college president said Chapman told her that a board member planned to suggest to Potts that he resign; Chapman couldn't remember the conversation.

Chapman did, however, acknowledge that he had conversations

with board members that “led him to believe” Potts would be asked to resign. A rumor was leaked to the local newspaper in Fargo that Potts would be asked to resign. Board members denied the rumors. The board gave Potts a vote of confidence.

Potts then asked the board for authority to enforce policies and reporting lines equally across all the institutions in the university system. Absent that authority he would resign.

Potts, in other words, refused to “play the game” by the dysfunctional rules that forbid directness. He brought the issue to the light of day. He did the right thing.

But the board lacked the backbone to grant his request.

Potts, a man of integrity, resigned. The one person who behaved with maturity is expelled from the system because he was different from the rest; does that sound familiar?

Potts was required to give Chapman a performance review before he left. In it he wrote that Chapman “engaged in a calculated effort to undermine the effectiveness” of the university system and “particularly me as chancellor.” Chapman, of course, denied being passive-aggressive.

Have you ever heard anyone admit to being passive-aggressive?

Passive/aggressive behavior is a spreading malignancy. Such behavior is destructive to people and to our institutions. Potts is out of a job and North Dakota has lost a leader it needs.

Potts will do fine—people like him are rare. I’m not so sure about North Dakota.

The North Dakota University System will go without a chancellor for at least a year. During this time, the system will flounder and it will be each institution for itself; the resisters win.

Citizens of North Dakota (where passive-aggressive is much more passive than in Minnesota) should be especially watchful for a reorganization—another way to avoid dealing with conflict and to give the appearance of progress.

North Dakota nice, Minnesota nice, and passive-aggressive behavior everywhere is a cancer upon relationships, organizations, and human growth. Passive-aggressive behavior prevents the creativity that comes from dealing with conflict directly. All of our institutions are in desperate need of that creativity.

What is the antidote to passive-aggressive behavior that so

permeates our society?

The answer is simple to state and difficult to do: Leaders must model the behavior they want to see in followers and create the conditions where people can learn and practice being direct and straightforward. Leaders must also hold people accountable. Leaders who do this run the risk of losing their jobs—like Robert Potts—but that is what real leaders do.

The rest of us need to find the courage to grow in our authenticity and to develop the **tough love** skills needed to be a successful human being in today's world.

Imagine if everyone got 20% better at being straightforward in your organization. I believe this alone would amount to a transformation of conduct, performance, and well-being that would stagger the senses. Imagine the creative potential of conflict managed even 20% more effectively. Imagine the impact of greater authenticity on trust, relationships, and employee satisfaction. What would the bottom-line impact be?

For this shift to begin, leaders must encourage, ask for, and ultimately require that people will challenge them, their decisions, and their processes. Leaders must value the truth and recognize how little of the truth they really hear. Leaders must understand that without knowing the truth they cannot chart the proper course for the organization. Leaders must realize that in a traditional organization, telling the boss the truth is a high-risk endeavor requiring great courage. Finally, leaders must realize that they must change first if they expect others to challenge the process.

Good leaders:

1. Strive to create an atmosphere that encourages questioning and challenge.
2. Talk with others openly about the need and importance of challenging decisions and actions that do not seem right.
3. Solicit feedback on how they are perceived to handle challenges.
4. Work to become non-defensive when challenged. Reward those who tell the truth--don't shoot the messenger.
5. Acknowledge mistakes. Apology builds credibility.
6. Fix the process and build mutual trust.
7. Build in systems, structures and norms, so all play by the same rules.

8. Reward those who are direct; hold those who are not accountable.

9. Share information widely, involve people in decisions that affect them, tell people why decisions are made, and acknowledge the ideas of others.

Good followers and challengers of leaders:

1. Recognize that challenging leadership is new to the culture and is uncomfortable to do and to have done to you.

2. Understand what is upsetting you and why.

3. Check out your perception with others. "This is how I reacted and why. How do you see it?"

4. Challenge another in person ("I want to share with you my reaction to your action and check out with you if the effect it had on me (others) was what you intended.") Do not challenge via voice-mail or e-mail.

5. Listen and clarify understanding.

6. Ask questions.

7. Do not challenge intent.

8. Challenge others within a reasonable time frame.


9. Come to a resolution of the issue, or know what the next step will be.

10. Accept decisions that are made and move on.

11. Walk away from relationships and organizations that are determined to deal with their anger in passive ways.

If we are to successfully transform our workplace, we must become willing to challenge others; we must make it safe for others to speak up; we must tell others the truth as we see it; we must recognize that there is more than one truth; and we must all be more authentic with one another. We must also do all of this with sensitivity and tact.

The next time you observe a behavior that upsets you, why not check it out with that person? Most of us are not mean spirited and do not act with ill intent. You might help the other person become aware of something she/he did not realize. You may help the



person realize that the affect of their behavior was not what they intended it to be, and you may learn something about your own bias's and assumptions. Together, you may reach a higher level of understanding than before the encounter.

The next time you observe a behavior that you like, why not tell the other person? You will reinforce the behavior, make the other person feel good, and will feel better about yourself.

Take a risk.