

A Lesson From George Washington

Brooks Carder

The past experiences of successful historical figures still can apply today—particularly those associated with human nature.

W. Edwards Deming frequently stated that an ultimate aim of quality was to create joy in the workplace.¹ We should remind ourselves of that aim on a regular basis.

I recently discovered a document that both surprised me and warmed my heart. A German executive with whom I had struck up a long conversation at a recent conference gave it to me. The letter detailed “instructions for captains” from Baron Friedrich von Steuben, a former Prussian officer who brought discipline approaches and training to George Washington’s army at the height of the Revolutionary War. He ultimately became Washington’s Chief of Staff. The letter, which is quoted below, appears to have been written at the request of Washington. It indicated to me that von Steuben was aware of the value of joy in the workplace.

“A captain cannot be too careful of the company the state has committed to his charge. He must pay the greatest attention to the health of his men, their discipline, arms, accouterments, ammunition, clothes, and necessaries. His first object should be, to gain the love of his men by treating them with every possible kindness and humanity, inquiring into their complaints, and when well founded, seeing them redressed. He should know every man of his company by name and character. He should often visit those who are sick, speak tenderly to them, see that the public provision, whether of medicine or diet, is duly administered, and procure them besides such comforts and conveniences as are in his power. The attachment that arises from this kind of attention to the sick and wounded, is almost inconceivable; it will moreover be the means of preserving the lives of many valuable men.”²

If this letter marks a high point in our philosophy of how to treat subordinates, I personally experienced a low point in the summer of 1960 between high school and college. I worked in an automotive assembly plant in the Kansas City area.

My father had been an executive there, and considering what I had heard from him I fully expected to see a collection of lazy workers who needed strict controls to perform at all. In fact, I experienced nothing to support that perspective. Instead, I saw a group of workers who were very discouraged about the terrible quality of the cars they were producing. The gulf between management and hourly workers was vast. Although supervisors in white shirts frequently rode by in golf carts, none ever spoke to me during my tenure. It took about two weeks on the job for me to dislike management!

The hostility toward management clearly was reflected in the workers’ performance and ultimately in the quality of the vehicles. It would have been very unlikely for a worker to suggest something that would improve the process. It would be assumed, almost certainly correctly, that management would not listen. Beyond that, however, from time to time workers actually would damage the vehicles. One day that I remember vividly, every fourth or fifth car arrived in my position with the shattered glass of the windshield lying inside the car. Later I worked in final repair, where completed vehicles were inspected and defects (hopefully) corrected. Many vehicles arrived with dents, which certainly did not happen without assistance from the workers. The fact that the automotive company was able to turn this around under Deming’s tutelage indicates that hostility toward management is not a fundamental characteristic of workers.

In later years, I learned that this automaker’s philosophy apparently was derived from the work of Frederick Taylor. His 1911 book, *Principles of Scientific Management*,³ was perhaps the most influential management book of the 20th century. During his involvement with manufacturing plants, Taylor perceived that the employees were working much more slowly than necessary. Rather than attempt to find out why, he developed methods of asserting control over the workers. His crowning achievement was to establish piece rate as the most efficient compensation structure. This quote represents a low

point in the philosophy of how to treat subordinates, establishing a fundamental distrust between labor and management, "... hardly a competent workman can be found in a large establishment, whether he works by the day or on piece work, contract work, or under any of the ordinary systems, who does not devote a considerable part of his time to studying just how slow he can work and still convince his employer that he is going at a good pace."

If workers did not have bad motives, however, why would they attempt to slow down work? One answer should have been obvious to Taylor. The work that he observed was incredibly dangerous. Although statistics are difficult to gather for that time, I found a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicating that the fatality rate of workers in the iron and steel industry in 1907 was approximately 2.2 per 100 workers per year.⁴ Under such hazardous conditions, workers were most likely to slow down and use caution in hopes of surviving. Driving up the pace of work certainly would have increased the danger. There was no Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the unions were weak. There was nothing to protect the worker other than his own ingenuity.

Management's belief that workers are not motivated to do a good job becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why should workers be treated with respect? If workers are not treated with respect, why should they go out of their way to help the company? In fact, disrespect is so corrosive that it has been found as a leading factor in violent crimes, including homicides.⁵ With this automotive maker's workers, the violent crime was taken out on the vehicles. Although I do not condone this practice, it is predictable. Disrespect is an inevitable result of Taylor's philosophy.

Deming, of course, was more like Washington. He noted, "The present style of reward ... Squeeze out from an individual over his lifetime his innate intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity. They build into him fear, self-defense, extrinsic motivation. We must preserve the power of intrinsic motivation, dignity, cooperation, curiosity, joy in learning."⁶

The auto manufacturer was ultimately a beneficiary of Deming's philosophy. The company's director of quality at the time of Deming's work told me the thing that gave him the most pride, relating to Deming's transformation of the company, was seeing senior executives and hourly workers sitting side by side in a class, clearly demonstrating respect.

The company's chairman said in his book that the one thing a plant manager could be fired for was a failure to know his/her employees.⁷ The chairman would tour plants with the managers and carefully evaluate the relationships that existed.

Although I am sure there have been ups and downs, Washington's philosophy appears to have survived in the U.S. Army. In his book about the transformation of the army after Vietnam, James Kitfield tells a story about Lt. Col. Jack Galvin (eventually a four-star general). Toward the end of the war, Galvin was ordered by his commander to launch an attack on a well-fortified enemy position. Galvin knew that his men would take heavy losses for an objective of little value. Consequently, he refused the order, knowing that it was a court-martial offence. His commander did not press for court-martial, but he did insert the following paragraph into Galvin's fitness report: "Lt. Col. Galvin puts consideration for his men before that of the mission," which was intended to be a rebuke. According to Kitfield, Galvin was more proud of that fitness report than of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, or any other medals and campaign ribbons he brought back from Vietnam. The fact that Galvin ended his career with four stars indicates that the value of taking care of military troops is still present.⁸

My personal experience is that the Army is on the right track. In the late 1990s, I had the opportunity to visit the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, where I observed Col. H.R. McMaster (now a four-star general and national security advisor) in action. He clearly respected and was admired by his men. Although there may have been many changes in the Army between the Revolutionary War and the present era, it brought joy to me to see the relationship McMaster had with the troops. There was joy in that workplace.

Today's managers need to decide which of these models they will follow. Not surprisingly, I prefer Washington's way. I believe that bringing joy for others into the workplace will generate positive results for managers and the entire organization.

References

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