



Great Leaders Understand Why Small Gestures Matter

by: Bill Taylor

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I travel a lot of for business, and like most frequent flyers, I dread connecting flights. Except, that is, when those connections take me through Denver or Charlotte, where the prospect of an hour between planes brings a smile to my face and a spring to my step. Why the good cheer? Because I know I'll be able to spend time with the men and women of Executive Shine, one of the most soulful (or is it soleful?) businesses I've ever encountered.

Based on the name, you can easily guess what kind of company Executive Shine is: it provides shoe-shine services to harried travelers racing between airport gates. But everything about how it does business is utterly surprising. On my last trip through Denver, I was so struck by the signage around the stands that I posted photos on social media. "Be grateful," one read. "Do it with passion," said another. "Love lives here," exclaimed a third. The 12-step shine process is intricate, fast-paced, and ends with a dramatic flourish—a small blowtorch that heats up the shoe's leather to let the polish sink in. The folks who do the shines always have an interesting question to ask or a fun story to tell; they bring a level of engagement that is truly memorable. And to top it off, the price is "whatever you think is right"—which means I happily pay more for an Executive Shine than the company would ever dream of charging.

For years, I thought Executive Shine was my little secret, one of the strange perks of being a road warrior, like having a favorite airport bar or knowing the fastest exit from a busy terminal. As it turns out, the company has become a kind of icon among business travelers and a source of fascination among business thinkers. One consultant published an essay on what he learned from Executive Shine. An article in The Charlotte Observer told story after story about the company's fans. One smitten customer brought an extra suitcase stuffed with 49 pairs of shoes with him on a trip to Charlotte and had all of them shined while he did business during the day. Rodd Ross, an 18-year veteran of Microsoft, was so impressed by his interactions with Getnet Marsha, an Ethiopian immigrant who runs Executive Shine's three kiosks at the Charlotte airport, that he invited him to speak to his IT services leadership team. Marsha moved the crowd to tears. True to form, when Ross asked Marsha what his speaking fee would be, he responded, "Whatever you think is right." He also asked that Microsoft make the check payable to his local church. "Love and compassion. That's how we do it,"

Marsha explained to The Charlotte Observer. “We do it from the heart. People come not just to get a shine but to talk with us.”

Maybe it’s time for all of us to reflect on the wisdom of Getnet Marsha and the performance of Executive Shine. So much of the business culture remains fixated on strategic disruption, digital transformation, and the meteoric rise (and disastrous fall) of venture-backed unicorns. What if we took just a moment to think a little smaller, to act a lot more humbly, to elevate the person-to-person interactions that lead to more meaningful relationships? Sure, successful companies and leaders think differently from everyone else. But they also care more than everyone else—about customers, about colleagues, about how the whole organization conducts itself when there are so many opportunities to cut corners and compromise on values. In a world being utterly reshaped (and often disfigured) by technology, people are hungrier than ever for a deeper and more authentic sense of humanity.

Another leader who embraces this point of view is Sheldon Yellen, CEO of BELFOR Holdings, a privately held disaster-restoration company that has grown from annual sales of \$5 million to more than \$1.5 billion under Yellen’s watch. BELFOR’s people jump into action after a flood, tornado, or fire damages or destroys property. It’s a tough, dirty, dangerous business. To express his appreciation, Yellen sends handwritten birthday cards to each employee every year—that’s 9,200 cards, plus additional anniversary cards, thank-you notes, and messages for a job well done, for a total of 12,000 or so handwritten notes per year. When he travels (unlike me, flying privately), he packs extra suitcases filled with cards, pre-addressed envelopes, and a blue gel pen that allows him to write 150 cards per flight.

Like Executive Shine and Marsha’s emphasis on love and compassion and their pay-what-you-wish policy, Yellen’s card-writing obsession seems crazy and hokey at the same time. But he argues that personal connection is essential for maintaining the level of employee commitment BELFOR needs to do its work. “When leaders forget about the human element, they’re holding back their companies and limiting the success of others,” he explained. When The Washington Post recently interviewed him about the rise of automated-signature robots programmed to mimic a person’s handwriting to send messages to customers, suppliers, parishioners, even family members, he explained that he has “no intention of stopping” his practice of writing notes on his own in favor of an automated, technological solution. “Doing this has helped build a culture of compassion, family, and respect,” he said. Need evidence? When Yellen turned 60, he got an appropriate gift—more than 8,000 handwritten birthday cards from BELFOR employees, who wanted to show their appreciation for the CEO’s tradition.

Small gestures—whether signage or speech, body language or handwritten messages—can send big signals about who we are, what we care about, and why we do what we do. Even (maybe especially) in this age of digital disruption and creative destruction, never

underestimate the power of a shine with soul or a well-crafted card. Don't let technology overwhelm your humanity.

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