



Keep a Humble Heart and an Open Mind

Larry Stambaugh

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“Keeping a Humble Heart and An Open Mind” - is the foundation upon which I have led teams at four companies. This principle establishes a culture which capitalizes on opportunity, thrives on change and overcomes adversity. Modesty (a humble heart) and good listening (an open mind) are qualities that get the best out of people and facilitate harmony inside and outside of the team. Profits and market value of the Company’s stock are the usual measures of a company’s success, however they are secondary to the people who create those results. If you build a team on sound principle, the team will be successful, and the team will be able to seize opportunity, adapt to changing markets, and stay ahead of the competition. Profits and market value will follow.

It is easy to become arrogant when success is achieved, or an important goal is reached. “Keeping a humble heart” reminds us that any accomplishment we achieve is a “spit in the ocean” of what is left to do. We can always improve upon anything we achieve. Modesty is the key to keeping a company and its associates from being too self absorbed and losing sight of others’ ideas and contributions. It is hard to keep an open mind when one

lacks modesty. We miss numerous good ideas, opportunities and great experiences each day, because we are mostly concerned with ourselves.

Keeping a humble heart leads to maintaining an open mind. It is not easy to keep an open mind. We are so trained and developed about what is, what should be, and we have the answers to most questions before they are even asked. Therefore, we miss many exciting things right around us every day. My experience, however, is that those who keep an open mind come up with the most creative solutions, have the most fun, and turn risks into successes more often. These people have learned the secret of “collective wisdom”. Openness to others, and looking for non-traditional thinking is one of the healthiest attributes a person can possess. At my companies we valued good listening as the most important personal skill an associate can have, a skill that is a key in determining who advances. We were given two ears and one mouth for a reason.

It takes much self-assuredness to allow oneself to be exposed to others, allow the “unaskable” to be asked and the “unquestionable” to be questioned. When it happens, we usually find out how much we didn’t know and how much fun it can be to think “way out of the box”. Consulting people from other disciplines with differing viewpoints uses the best of collective wisdom in solving problems.

Creating a company with an open mind means making sure everyone knows that he/she can change any thing at any time. If it is not working – don’t complain about it – change it. This principle

applies to any part of the company. Of course, an associate has to check it out with their fellow associates so they don't cause problems for others. If it is constructive – and the rest of the team agrees - just do it. And by the way – the culture should be one that doesn't take sixteen meetings and fourteen memos to get it reviewed and implemented. Put the authority in the hands of the associates that have the ideas or are dealing with the problem.

Using collective wisdom also requires a harmony within the company and with its external partners, vendors and customers. This harmony means that the associates should be comfortable calling upon other departments, disciplines and outsiders to discuss their ideas, problem, or needs. By practicing collective wisdom one creates a harmony that brings together the components.

Making an important cultural principle work in a company means it has to start at the top. At my companies, I meet with groups of six of my associates over breakfast several times during the year. These breakfasts begin with our introducing each other in the group. The only message I bring to breakfast is, “you can change anything here at anytime, so don't complain if it's not working – change it. I do not know what to do – you do”. During the remainder of breakfast, the associates are allowed to ask anything – and they get straight answers to their questions. I listen. These breakfast meetings have been one of the greatest sources of improving my companies in small and big ways. Below are just a few of the changes that we have made at my companies:

- We moved our monthly “all associates” meeting to the first thing in the morning, after the suggestion to do so at one of our breakfast meetings. Our midday meeting was causing people to inconveniently start and stop work, and they were losing precious time commuting to the meeting. This change was the associates' idea, and their suggestion made good sense. Top management often does not know what problems they cause – which is a very good reason to listen.
- I became aware, during one breakfast, of how poorly one of our top managers communicated and worked with his team. The issue would have taken me much longer to discover, if I had not had breakfast with the associates that morning. The associates were frustrated and were trying to resolve the problem, however they needed help from above. By addressing this issue promptly, following the meeting, top management gained respect by stepping up to this thorny problem. It also spoke volumes to the associates about knowing that they could ask for help when they needed it. (PS: the top manager eventually was terminated, and a deserving person in our organization filled this important position).
- Several associates expressed a desire to be more active in our community. We let them start an activities committee to coordinate these efforts, and the Company supported their projects. As a result we participated in a program that helped cancer patients deal with their disease, established the first biotechnology industry-wide blood drive, and numerous other company and individual associate efforts. The cross-company relationships that have resulted from these associates' ideas have been great for team building. Moreover, we all have felt Company pride in what we have accomplished, and feel good about

being a better corporate citizen.

- At one breakfast, an associate was talking about his scientific formulation project. Another associate from a separate part of our company stated that she had experience in the area, and knew a lot about that type of project. The result – the first associate received unexpected advice and help, which allowed him to substantially improve his formulation project, and more expediently solve some of the tougher problems he faced. I am amazed at how much we don't know about each other – another reason to listen and keep an open mind.

When a company is successful and grows in size, this can breed arrogance among associates. To help prevent individuals or groups from behaving in parochial ways, it is critical to practice “collective wisdom” and encourage others to do the same. This means making decisions after input has been given from anyone who should have a say. This is not to say that decisions at the company are a 51 percent democracy, they aren't. Decisions will be made after receiving input so that they are well informed and focused on the company's mission.

A humble person will not become reckless or arrogant. A person with a humble heart will genuinely listen to others, pay attention to the mission of the Company and do what is right.

Modesty (a humble heart) and good listening (an open mind) are qualities that get the best out of people and facilitate harmony inside and outside of the team.

One of the most important things is to have an open mind. One should not act only upon their own knowledge. Regardless of whom the other person is you will acquire unexpected knowledge if you listen with a modest attitude, expecting to learn something.

Lifelong learning is also closely associated with humility, an open mind, and willingness to take risks a capacity to listen, and host self-reflection.

There are several other principles that could be mentioned for building a great team. I believe, however, that the principle of “Keeping a Humble Heart and An Open Mind” is the most important. From it come our team culture and the attitude upon which my companies have been built. This simple principle stimulates creative problem solving, more fun at work, higher ownership of results and superior accomplishment.

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