

A leader's legacy of teamwork, humility



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Late last year I attended a retirement celebration for a longtime friend and co-worker at Danfoss Power Solutions.

I'll call him "Keith" because, well, that's his name and I believe one should never pass up an opportunity to recognize someone for a job well done.

Through the years, I've observed dozens of these celebrations. But this one was different. Speaker after speaker, some teleconferenced in from around the globe, spoke for the better part of two hours.

They shared anecdotes, not so much funny or embarrassing episodes as is typically done, but stories of how Keith had personally and powerfully impacted them — their careers, their lives, their families. The tone was not so much of revelry but rather sincere gratitude.

My intent here is not to heap more praise upon Keith. There already was more of that than I'm sure he was comfortable with during his celebration (I would not have been surprised had he ascended directly to the heavens at its conclusion).

Rather, there are some leadership lessons to be learned from Keith's example. Since that involves developing people, I believe he'll be fine with this.

Keith's career at Danfoss started 40-plus years ago, on the third-shift washer line. Stick an air nozzle into a hole in a cast iron part and pull the trigger. Repeat for eight hours. It doesn't get more humble than that.

Even though he rose to general manager, Keith never lost that humility. He remained approachable to workers at all levels of the organization throughout his career.

Because he was humble by nature, he understood that his role was to serve those working for him so that they could do a better job making products and taking care of customers — in short, building the business.

His employees weren't distracted by requests for special reports or dog-and-pony shows that would make him look good in the eyes of his superiors.

Keith's ability to serve others was perhaps most obvious during the tough times. During the crisis

of the Great Recession, rapid and brutal cuts were required to keep the business solvent. Keith didn't waste his time complaining about the past imprudent "investments" that executives had made to overextend the company.

Rather, he painstakingly provided regular updates to employees on what was going on and what it meant to them. During this awful time a friend confided in me, "Thank God we have Keith at the helm to guide us through this mess."

Because he wasn't focused on his own advancement, Keith oozed teamwork. But teamwork wasn't just promoted within his team; it was expected across the teams of the larger organization. In short, the organization was bigger than his team.

Lest you get the impression that Keith was a pushover, let me share my favorite story from his celebration. Dave was a young leader with a big heart and gobs of potential. But occasionally he had the tendency to handle a personnel issue with the tact of a middle linebacker on third down and short. See the issue — SMACK!

Following his first coaching session with Keith, Dave's wife asked how his day at work went.

"OK, I guess. But I think Keith told me that I'm doing a crappy job."

"You *think* he told you?"

"Yeah, but I feel like the entire time he was talking to me, he was also giving me a big bear hug."

Author's note: Dave got the message.

Some leaders are all about customers. Others are all about the business. Some (especially engineers) can be totally into the products. And unfortunately, a few "leaders" put themselves at the center of the universe.

Keith focused on developing and serving his people, giving them new opportunities and creating a place where teamwork was the norm. In the process, he built an organization that will take care of customers, build great products and produce impressive financial results long after his departure.

RICK SAYS

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