

Reflections on Leadership



Getting Personal

July 2017

One of my favorite movies is the 1990's classic "You've Got Mail". The movie is about the owner of a small bookstore that is being put out of business by a super-sized bookstore chain (which is pretty ironic because in the intervening years large chain bookstores have been under attack by Amazon and other online sources). In one memorable e-mail exchange between the two main characters, Tom Hanks – the owner of Fox Books, explains to Meg Ryan, the owner of the small neighborhood children's bookstore, The Shop Around the Corner, that the conflict between the two business enterprises is not personal. Meg Ryan strongly disagrees and her response concludes with the following:

And what's so wrong with being personal, anyway?... Whatever else anything is, it ought to begin by being personal.

I was thinking about this insightful comment and how it applies to our work in serving seniors. For most of PSL's 90 year history we have been focused on the personal touch in our relationship with the people we serve. The original model for PSL's personal care facilities was described in the byline on our letterhead in the 1940's – "Small, Scattered, Homelike Homes for

the Aging". Each location had less than 30 residents and featured a live in administrator and family style dining. In this intensely personal environment staff and residents became like family.

In more recent years the Culture Change Network has coined the term "Person Centered Care" as the best way to describe the intention to make services responsive to the personal needs and desires of each individual. PSL has been active in this person centered movement and has worked to apply these concepts throughout the continuum of services to seniors. In an era of heightened regulation and a more medically complex environment, a person centered approach can be challenging. But the person centered approach is the lens through which we at PSL see the future of aging services.

As a faith based organization, this personal approach is more than a good model for providing services. It reflects a spiritual concept – That every person is an eternal being, created by a loving God. This is best expressed by one of my all-time favorite quotes from the theologian C.S. Lewis:

You don't have a soul. You are a soul – you have a body. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a

mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization – these are mortal, and their life to ours is as the life of a gnat. But it is the immortals we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit... Next to ... (God himself) your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."

This view of the world changes everything in the way we relate to those around us. Everyone deserves respect and kindness. Every person – even the most flawed and marginalized among us is to be treated with great care as the holiest of objects.



For PSL leaders and team members this philosophy should be extended to every person we work with and every new person who joins the PSL team. From a system perspective, person centered concepts are being embraced as part of the recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and staff education / retention processes. But constructing

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and implementing an effective person centered approach to staff engagement will require the effort of every PSL team member regardless of their position. For example, staff retention and turnover is profoundly affected by whether or not each new team member is embraced or treated with indifference by their immediate supervisor and the people they work with. The same is true in the cultivation of relationships between long time staff members. People who have a personal connection with the people they work with tend to stay for a long time.

So how does this “personal” thing happen between people who work together on a day to day basis? Ty Bennett in his little book “The Power of Influence” argues for what he calls “Outward thinking”. Being outwardly focused involves paying attention to others, adding value to their lives, celebrating their triumphs, ultimately influencing them in a positive way. He also talks about the power of investing in others. One of the ways we invest in those around us is by creating a personal connection. He observes:

- *When we talk to people personally and not just professionally, we connect.*
- *When we open up personally, others can relate.*
- *When we are vulnerable and authentic, we allow others to be the same, and we bond.*

Bennett continues by explaining the being “other focused” takes practice – like spending more time being interested **in** people than trying to be an interesting person **to** others.

Fundamental to this effort is a genuine curiosity about those around you. What are their likes and interests? What do they value in life? What are they most proud of in their life experience? What are their goals and aspirations for the future? When we connect with someone on this level friendships will grow naturally.

There is always the risk of making someone uncomfortable by being intrusive or providing too much information. It is important to set appropriate boundaries, and to keep confidences when personal information is shared. But genuine interest and concern for other human beings can create bonds of affection that can combine to make for a satisfying work and life experience.



About 10 years ago I had the opportunity to visit a staff person that I had hired as a nurse in 1977. At the time she was hired she was in her middle 50’s. Now in her middle 80’s she had recently become too ill to work and I was stopping by her home to present her with a 30 year service pin. It was a wonderful visit. She regaled me with stories of residents and staff that she had loved in her 30 years of employment. She told me about her employment interview

more than 30 years earlier. PSL was one of several places where she had interviewed, and she had a number of opportunities to choose from. She said that before that day she had never considered working with seniors in long term care. But when she visited us, she knew immediately that this was the place for her. She was treated with kindness and courtesy by everyone from the receptionist to the departmental staff as they passed through the lobby. Following her employment she developed friendships with those she worked with every day. Reflecting her experience over the past 30 years, she knew that she had made the right decision. That conversation remains in my memory as a sacred moment.

What is the lesson from this story? Each of us can contribute to creating a positive work environment. Our efforts to personally connect with others can have powerful and enduring consequences. We can start by following the advice from the movie “You’ve Got Mail”. **“Whatever else anything is, it ought to begin by being personal.”**

Blessings,