

THE MOUNT · VERNON · REPORT

“Issues Affecting Reputation Management and Strategic Communication”

Considering Compassion for 21st Century Business

The most famous line from the pen of Charles Dickens – “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” – is as fitting a description for the post millennium age as it was for Dickens’ story of 18th century France. We are simultaneously living in an era of unparalleled promise and unspeakable tragedy, a world where triumph and trials exist at once. Our culture is one marked by its complications and contradictions; characterized as much by its crippling social ills as its miraculous and enlightened social, medical and political advancements.

Every day we are witness, through the power of media, to both tragedy and success on a local, national and global scale. A world that was once too big to comprehend has been reduced to the size of the average suburban neighborhood. As human beings, the events made known to us each day through the media trigger natural, emotional reactions that run the gamut from sheer joy to despair.

Thinking happy thoughts is easy. Hearing that conjoined twins were successfully separated; crying happy tears that trapped coal miners have cheated death; feeling pride for an inner-city child who overcame insurmountable odds to become the first in her family to be accepted to college; cheering wildly when a football player who recently lost both his parents to cancer scores the winning touchdown – these are examples of the warm, fuzzy thoughts that validate our existence as sensitive, compassionate people.

It is the other end of the spectrum that is more difficult.

The stories that are tougher to take, locally, nationally and globally, are those that sap our strength and test our propensity toward compassion, one of our culture’s more unsung yet crucial emotions. Each day, the media provides us with messages that push and pull our hearts and heads in directions powerful enough to generate an emotional reaction. The media delivers the happy stories of successful surgeries,

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Personal Perspective

Compassion is the result when we place the needs of others above our own. We remember from college psychology class Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs,” which identifies those lower level pursuits of humans – air, food, water, shelter and reproduction. Once those needs are satisfied, humans are free to pursue higher order endeavors. Noblest of those actions may be the desire to help others free themselves from physical pain or emotional distress.

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Corporate Culture with Empathy: A Winning Combination

During the height of the dotcom bubble, one of the most difficult challenges facing companies was finding and keeping talented, smart people on a payroll. As the media trumpeted stories of instant 23-year-old millionaires, many workers jumped from job to job in an effort to land somewhere that could lead to an IPO bonanza.

Desperate to attract smart, hard-working personnel and create an “instant corporate culture,” employers flush with VC money built game rooms filled with fuseball and ping-pong tables, installed espresso-making machines and filled refrigerators with sodas, snacks and treats.

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sports victories and local heroes, yet it is the media that also feeds us the news that our country may be headed to war, that an incurable virus has afflicted those close to us, or that a generation of young people is starving with no help in sight.

This type of news tries our capacity as humans to feel compassion. Compassion, in simple terms, is a sense of sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another or others, accompanied by an urge to help (Webster). Compassion goes further than pity or remorse, it moves beyond sadness or lament. Compassion propels us to act. That is its power.

The need for compassion is mounting – not just in our own land but worldwide. The business community locally and nationally has a renewed responsibility to extend a compassionate ear, eye and heart to its fellow members...

Compassion is not a word we often hear in the corporate realm. It is not a chapter in an annual report or a category on a personnel review. In an age where Enron and Tyco paint the dominant picture of corporate America, layoffs lurk around every corner and career advancement is a far-off notion in a flailing economy, the desire to adopt an “every man for himself” mentality may be tempting. Compassion may seem like a laughable aim, but the truth is that it is more important than ever.

It benefits all of us in the corporate world to remember to keep compassion in mind. Many times, the parts of our clients, that seem the most important – winning new business, surpassing financial expectations, beating a competitor to the punch with the launch of a new product, hiring the best personnel – are fleeting notions when compared with the impact genuine compassion can achieve.

Employees recall when their colleagues were a little less demanding and a lot more patient in times of personal distress. Customers remember when their names were attached to a philanthropic donation to a worthy charity. It is better to be consistently remembered for compassionate behavior than occasionally noticed for self-serving successes.

Our nation’s finest moments have been sprinkled with compassion. The events of September 11, 2001 made visible a country of people whose compassion overwhelmed a planet. The power of unity was realized in a way never before imagined. For a short time, we sought the common goal of social, political and emo-

tional restoration. The recent Columbia space shuttle tragedy stirred the same response in not only our nation, but the world.

As this version of *The Mount Vernon Report* goes to print, the United States is poised to declare war on Iraq, security at national borders is at a historical pinnacle, children still are falling victim to starvation at an alarming rate in Third World countries, and corporate scandal has created a business environment wrought with fear and anger.

While it is true the media is inarguably the source for the vast majority of information we receive on the world’s happenings, it is not entirely fair to blame the media for the country’s diminishing sense of compassion. The sporadic, incomplete and biased information we receive on the world’s tragedies is the result of an amalgam of things.

We are all culpable. Blaming our lack of compassion on the media’s shortcomings is unfair unless we consider that the media’s shortcomings may only mirror our own lack of compassion. True, they are not telling us the whole story. But do we really want to hear it?

The average broadcast news piece is approximately 30 seconds, and the average newspaper article is about 500 words. Former New York Times editor Max Frankel once estimated that “America’s picture of the planet is painted” by no more than a few hundred correspondents. A 1995 Pew Research Center study found that one-third of all international news stories are “essentially about the United States in the world, rather than about the world.” Hundreds of journalists are charged with the responsibility of telling millions what is happening in their world. There is literally not enough time and space in our culture to provide each deserving issue its due attention.

The need for compassion is mounting – not just in our own land but worldwide. The business community locally and nationally has a renewed responsibility to extend a compassionate ear, eye and heart to its fellow members, to understand the collective struggles we all face and to acknowledge the humanity of its members. Compassion is the opposite of apathy. It is the kryptonite for ignorance. And it may just be at its most powerful close to home.

It is difficult to inject a business with compassion. We can’t teach it in a seminar or make it a topic at our annual meeting. There are limits to our emotional capacity and the responsiveness of our peers. One person’s compassion cannot solve problems on the global scale. The responsibility of compassion must be shared on a local, national and global level.

It is within our power to set an example in the corporate realm.

~ Kerry Murphy

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Being identified as a compassionate person or collectively, as a compassionate company or organization, often comes to those who seek recognition least. Caring people help because it is the right thing to do, not to gain credit for their good work. Relieving suffering makes us better people, both spiritually and emotionally. It also helps us to become more respected, contributing members of society.

Helping others may be born out of empathy, that human trait of being able to understand and identify with the pain of others. It is not enough just to feel sorry for someone. Greater good comes when we see someone in pain and reach out, acting on our sympathy to right a wrong.

The range of compassion spans simple acts of kindness to life-saving moments of heroism.

Those who have put themselves in harm's way and risked their lives for others recall having had an overwhelming urge to save the other person, even a complete stranger. They are compelled to act. This seemingly instinctive desire to help may be a remnant of our early development as a race, when we all stood as equals to face the shared perils of existence.

Man is a deeply social animal. We must strive to see ourselves among our fellow human beings and identify ourselves as members of one human race, not as xenophobic Americans or closed-minded members of a club, religion, elite group or special interest. We can still have our special cause, business, mission or goal, but gains for humankind come when we consider our goals in the context of societal good.

We don't have to crawl out onto thin ice to save a drowning child to make a difference. Small acts of kindness have a cumulative effect. Human compassion inspires the highest achievements of man in science, medicine, the arts, and business and commerce. By behaving responsibly toward others, companies gain good will and enduring positive reputations. Their good acts create high self-esteem and outstrip temporal pride. Employees, shareholders and customers have deeper respect for CEOs and companies who behave nobly to help others.

People are attracted to compassionate leaders, teams and companies. Americans celebrate the underdog because, as a nation, we believe that hard work and perseverance can overcome adversity. We admire those who lend a helping hand toward that goal.

Compassionate people inspire us to put aside our differences for the common good. This winter issue of The Mount Vernon Report focuses on the good we are all capable of doing by helping others.

~ Peter Morrissey

Showing Respect For Co-workers

In every workplace, there are times when employees and co-workers face personal or professional difficulty. Whether caused by work-related stress or personal issues, employees – individually or collectively – have to deal with problems that affect their work from time to time.

While workers often seek comfort in the routine of the workplace and try to divorce all that is personal and emotional from business, it is important to show compassion to those with whom you work. The fabric of the community in a work environment can benefit from expressions of emotions and calls for others to show compassion.

Employers, supervisors and co-workers can improve morale, inspire loyalty and build their organization's reputation by engaging in some expression – even if on a small scale – that demonstrates empathy and compassion for employees who are trying to cope with difficult problems.

Here are five simple examples of how to show compassion:

- Most people, at one time or another, have worked in close quarters with co-workers. If you sense a co-worker needs his or her space, find another area of your office to temporarily conduct your business.
- In today's demanding business environment, most people wear multiple hats. If you realize that a co-worker is inundated with work and can't get out from underneath their pile of "to-dos," offer your assistance.
- "Don't sweat the small stuff" is a good motto. However, when showing compassion for your co-workers, it's the small stuff that might turn a frown into a smile. If a co-worker is having a rough day, a small gift in the form of a bag of M&M's might not make their problems disappear, but it just might brighten their day. If your co-worker isn't a "chocolatic," try giving him or her a card to show sympathy or humor – depending on the situation and the individual.
- Lunch is always a good break in the day. It's the mid-day, work-release program that can energize you to get through the final few hours of the day. Your personal time is precious, but lending your ear to your co-worker for a half hour can go a long way. Sometimes talking is the best medicine. Listening is even better.
- The word "respect" means "to consider deserving of high regard." Compassion can be considered a form of respect because it demonstrates the high regard you hold for others. Show respect and compassion for your co-workers and it will likely come back to you two-fold.

~ Don Martelli

“I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.”

~ William Faulkner,
Nobel Prize acceptance speech, December 1950

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It didn't work.

It was all part of a frantic bid to keep workers in their jobs longer than a few months or a couple short years. The job-hopping phenomenon was so prevalent, *U.S. News and World Report* ran an article in late 1999 entitled, “Loyalty, Schmoalty: Why It Pays to Quit.”

We were living la vida loca. But then the bubble burst, the job-jumping trend stopped, and unemployment skyrocketed. Fuseball tables were shipped off to basement rec rooms. And the attempts to create instant corporate culture around fun and games, like the companies built around flimsy business models and no revenues, crashed faster than Ricky Martin's career.

It turns out that companies with cultures that instill and encourage old-fashioned values, such as honesty, integrity and compassion, are finding that their workers are more committed, productive and hard working.

Corporate compassion appears in two forms. One is for employees, in the form of understanding personal situations and difficulties, flexible work schedules, telecommuting programs and day care, as well as encouraging employees to do their best work.

The other, equally important side of compassion in corporate culture is for the community and nurturing workers' desire and need to enrich our society.

Successful companies are finding new and different ways to encourage community service, as well as reward employees who donate their time to charities and community causes.

The MONY Group, a New York-based financial services firm, donates \$100 to any charity in which one of its workers has volunteered for five hours or more over six months. The policy has

encouraged its employees to perform community service projects and has fostered company morale.

“Doing something positive in the community gives employees a feeling of connectedness and feeling that it's not just about doing business,” explained a spokesman with the MONY Groups MONY Foundation.

Miller Brewing Company sponsors a “Day of Caring” in which every employee in the company's Milwaukee office devotes a day to a community project in the city. One Miller division spent a day working at a hunger task force. A meeting shortly after the project was “the most enthusiastic, productive meeting the division ever had,” said one Miller spokesman, who believes the volunteer project developed team-building and fostered a sense of accomplishment. The company has since seen a surge in employee volunteerism.

Here in Boston, the City Year program started the annual Serv-a-thon in 1988. Each year, thousands of people from hundreds of companies and agencies fan out across the city to clear sidewalks, paint schools, renovate playgrounds and perform hundreds of tasks that sometimes go neglected. Co-workers build friendships and provide a community benefit in an exhausting but extremely rewarding day.

It's this kind of compassion – for employees and for the community – that builds a strong, lasting corporate culture, enhances employee relationships, cultivates loyalty that lasts and burnishes an organization's reputation.

Fuseball and ping-pong may be fun during a lunch break. But when the game is over, workers go back to their desks. Corporate compassion – for people and society – lasts longer by fostering friendships and morale, enhancing productivity, and making the world a slightly better place.

~ John Lamontagne

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