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Business Is Personal!

I was catching up on old issues of the *Wall Street Journal* some time ago when I ran into an advertisement by a law firm whose tagline is “Business is personal”, or as they more fully state, “Providing honest value is at the center of our relationships, and we demonstrate that business is personal.”

What an interesting thought, especially for lawyers. (Pardon the bad professional joke!) However, I think they have it right, these lawyers! Their statement of values could be, it seems to me, the credo for any kind of business, professional or otherwise.

One of the principal models in TEAM International’s leadership and teamwork programs has been the Noel Osborn “2 Rs” – Results and Relationships. We emphasize that business is indeed personal -- leadership (and teamwork) is a personal act, it’s about people. It’s about getting results, of course; but without the relationships, you don’t achieve results, at least in the longer run – and the long run in most of our businesses is...this afternoon!

We have also expanded the model to 3Rs – adding Responsibility (or Accountability) to the mix, and focusing on mutual accountability in team behaviors and practices. And that’s also about people-to-people commitments, read mutual accountability. Again, it’s about – and among – people.

The Center for Creative Leadership long ago published its series of “Derailment Studies”¹. i.e. the problems that most knocked executives out of the executive suite? Here are the 10 that are most important:

- Specific performance problems (e.g. can’t handle certain kinds of jobs or can’t change)
- Insensitivity to others (an abrasive, bullying, intimidating style)
- Cold, aloof, arrogant
- Betrayal of trust
- Overmanaging, failure to delegate or build a team
- Overly ambitious
- Failing to staff effectively
- Inability to think strategically
- Unable to adapt to a boss with a different style
- Overdependence on a mentor or advocate.

Note that at least 8 of the above 10 have to do with “people problems” – inability to handle relationships in one form or another. Is there any doubt that these are derailment factors? Let’s dig more deeply for a moment. In a recent *Business Week*², the Cover Story article is entitled “Sweet Revenge: The power of retribution, spite, and loathing in the world of business”. Here’s yet another “R” for you -- Revenge. The article talks about getting back and getting even, and cites a number of cases of (usually) a high-ranking executive who has been undone by another that he/she has

seriously offended or ruined. Lee Iacocca is one of the prime examples: throughout his autobiography about his success in the Chrysler turnaround, Iacocca lambastes Henry Ford II who fired him from his job at the family company. Writes Lee: "Because of my pension, he [Ford] still pays me a lot of money to go to work every morning to see if I can knock his block off." The oldest example cited, proving that there's nothing new in this "R" in business, is Cornelius Vanderbilt, who in 1853 discovered that his associates had cheated him out of his ownership in a company – a classic example of one of the CCL derailment factors above, "betrayal of trust". Vanderbilt wrote, in a famous battle cry often quoted: "Gentlemen, you have undertaken to cheat me. I won't sue you, for the law is too slow. I'll ruin you." Is this righteous revenge or what...?

What is there that provokes revenge and makes it so sweet? The *BW* article quotes Ernst Fehr, a behavioral economist at the University of Zurich. Says Fehr: "There's a hedonic force behind [revenge]." If a person hurts us, there's something delicious about getting back at them. Why? Because we take it personally, that's why! The lawyers were right after all -- business is personal.³

A final note: Richard Olivier, the son of famous Shakespearean actor Laurence Olivier, conducts workshops for leaders using Shakespeare's plays to work his participants through issues of revenge, ambition, and power. Olivier says the following: "You rarely see someone with a knife in their back; but you see lots of people who are dying the death of a thousand small cuts." And paraphrasing the old Bard himself, "These are the unkindest cuts of all...." We die or at least derail, and that's a matter to be taken personally, to be sure!

¹ Morgan McCall, et.al. *The Lessons of Experience*, CCL, 1988, p.168-169.

² *Business Week*, January 22, 2007, p. 64 - 70.

³ For more on the "triggers" of revenge, see Robert J. Bies, "How employees respond to personal offense", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2001.