



## Genuine Care at Work

### Why care?

A lot is written about leadership traits such as vision, integrity, resilience, positivity, accountability, and even humility. It is my opinion that *genuine care* is the cornerstone of leadership and deserves a great deal more attention and reinforcement than it gets today. Genuine care epitomizes our purpose—not just in the workplace, but in all things we do. A

corporate vision is only as good as the team's genuine care for customers and employees. Integrity represents genuine care in our actions. Leaders who exercise genuine care achieve greater results, and make choices they are less likely to regret.

“Employees who feel personally and consistently cared for are more likely to pay individual attention to not only their customers and colleagues but also the work these people do. The key word is here is ‘consistently’: Great leaders make employee engagement a regular, year-round priority, never limiting their show of appreciation to a single day or season.”

*Bruce Jones of the Disney Institute in the Harvard Business Review*

Leaders who genuinely care about people at work can expect the following outcomes:

- Workplace environment is positive and collaborative
- Purity of intent expedites decision-making
- Teams perform better
- Customers buy into the brand and become raving fans
- Failures don't cause finger-pointing or regrets

## Who cares?

There is no doubt in most people's minds about the benefits of genuine care. After all, what could feel more rewarding than helping others? Yet, most people find it hard to prioritize genuine care above other work-related actions. There always seems to be something more urgent or more critical to do.

A couple of years ago at a national CIO summit, a question came up about aligning CIO priorities with those of the business. A CIO in the audience literally asked a panel, "Where do I start?" One of the panelists responded that the most practical idea he could think of was to attend a sales call with a customer. The responder then proceeded to poll the audience. He asked for all CIOs who'd attended a sales appointment with their organization's prospects in the last 12 months to raise their hand. To my surprise, only 3 hands came up out of maybe 120 people in the audience. If CIOs genuinely cared about their organization's success, they would make a point of learning what the customers need firsthand. Yet, they apparently allocate time to other priorities.

Let's not be too hard on CIOs. The same assertion can be applied to CMOs, COOs, CHRs, and General Councils, etc. Many leaders seem to leave genuine care for customers to the sales team, while sales teams mostly care about meeting quotas.

There are plenty of people who do cultivate a discipline of genuine care for customers. In IT, many define their Digital

Transformations as using data on the end consumers of their product or service to provide new or improved products or services. In a way, Digital Transformations are the manifestation of genuine care for customers.

## Who do we care about?

In the workplace, there is a spectrum of subjects to care about depending on the circumstances and context. On the small end of the scale, we start with individuals and small groups and expand outward to customers and other external parties affected by our actions.

### Individuals

An example of genuine care about a colleague might be asking them about their career objectives. Maybe that person reports to you and you conduct their performance reviews. Maybe they don't report to you but contribute to your project. Learning about their objectives and trying to help them out goes a long way toward building goodwill and trust.

### Organizations

An example of genuine care for the organization might relate to a new IT initiative. The project might be exciting because it is

ambitious and has high visibility. But while it mobilizes many people, you may question how the new technology will actually make the end customers or internal users happy. If you genuinely care about your organization and customers, you want to find out how the project will affect them. It is OK to go beyond the excitement and the ambiguity and ask stakeholders and sponsors for an explanation of the business case. They will hopefully appreciate the conversation because it comes from a place of genuine care, and you will feel way more motivated about the cause.

## Suppliers

Sometimes multiple care groups come into play. But rarely does genuine care for all the groups create a conflict. For example, you might be designing a new product that your customers will love. A new product might not use a component that one of your specialty suppliers makes. A move to a new product may put your supplier out of business. Genuine care for the supplier would call for full transparency with them early and often. This way you give them a chance to help them find a way to stay in business despite losing a valuable revenue stream.

The full range of genuine care can be extended to:

- **Individuals** – colleagues that you work closely with and other employees
- **Teams and organizations** – project teams, warehouse staff, functional departments, the entire company
- **Customers** – your customers, and your customers' customers

- **Partners and vendors**
- **Affected communities**
- **The entire human race**
- **The planet**

## Why we avoid genuine care

The natural question is, *Why aren't more people practicing genuine care?* There are two barriers: **exertion of emotional energy** and **risk**.

### Emotional Energy

It's hard to figure out another person's ambitions and motivations. It requires emotional energy. And, if simple exertion of energy is not enough of a deterrent, the time spent figuring it out could also be allocated to urgent matters. The last thing most of us want to do is spend time figuring out odd ideas in an employee's mind while critical emails from top management are waiting for a response. But figuring out what drives another employee is instrumental in helping them succeed. Sometimes top management can wait for an hour or two for a reply.

### Risk

Asking about the benefits to customers of an IT investment is

something many of us don't feel comfortable with. It feels like a risk to pipe up and put undue attention on yourself. After all, someone with a higher pay grade has decided on the investment and that decision is going to keep a lot of people busy. Ideally, the investment will have a positive effect on the organization and make customers happy. But that effect on the customers is not necessarily obvious and, more importantly, likely depends on the approach you take for the initiative. The right thing to do is to ask the decision-makers about the value to the customers because you genuinely care about them. It is the right question to ask and the right thing to do. You might learn logic that you were not aware of. And you'll show you actually give a damn.

This combination of exertion of emotional energy and perceived risk-taking often takes us outside our comfort zones—which is imperative to professional growth. If you genuinely care, you step outside your comfort zone for the greater benefits.

## Leaders nurture a discipline of genuine care

Great leaders are the ones who care about people more than stock prices, net profits, or even strategic goals. The underlying reason digital transformations have become popular is that they represent the lucrative side of care for customers. But digital transformations are just a form, while genuine care is the cornerstone of leadership.

“Great leaders make genuine care a regular, daily

priority.”

*Bruce Jones of the Disney Institute in the Harvard Business Review*