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When You Step Into Business

To: Future Business Leaders of the World

From: A Former Corporate Citizen

Re: Corporate Social Responsibility

When you enter business, you not only enter an organization that is designed to make money, to earn a profit for its shareholders. You also enter into a living community of people. Tread lightly. You have the power to make the community alive and vibrant. You also have the power to make it whither and die, to cause great pain while people around you figure out how to be human and make a living at the same time.

Go about your business of managing projects, strategizing on new product launches, motivating your sales force, compiling the numbers before the next quarterly report. Hire the right people and work through friction between your department's needs and the other department's wants.

Through it all, remember that you are a trustee of life inside an organization. The work environment can be the foundation for each one of us to step into our brilliance. Or it can be the rug that has been pulled out from under us, to make us dance in the most awkward of ways.

Our work is our lives. Most people don't want to admit that, because work can be painful. Not in a visceral way. But in the deadening, dull way that a toothache comes on, until the feeling can no longer be ignored.

What is it to be a leader? There are countless books on this, ones that take you in a multitude of directions and after reading, you realize you have gone around in circles, with only a slight change in latitude and longitude. Why be a leader? Who can be a leader? Ask these questions to understand leadership. Observe who does what and how. And observe the results, visible and written and talked about in the company newsletter, and those not so visible but felt and whispered in your heart. Leaders are not only seen and heard. They are felt.

Who will you impact and in what way? How will people feel you? Not feel *about* you. *Feel you*. Your imprint on an organization is your legacy. People think that you have a choice about legacy, about what people say about you after you leave. You do. And you don't. You have a choice about how you show up in the workplace. You don't have a choice about who you are, at your core.

There are enough brilliant strategic thinkers in business. There are enough people who know how to "get things done." There are enough people who know what it's like to fire up a sales force to meet quota. What's needed is what *you* bring to the organization as a unique human being. You might ask, "What does that really mean?" It means finding that place where you are "in the groove", where your own enthusiasm sustains not only yourself but others around you. Be bold enough to learn who you are and play it full out.

There are management theories of organizations as living organisms. This is a stark contrast from earlier days of a mechanistic, command and control view of organizations as human factories, to be optimized and scrutinized and timed and quality assured. If this is true, that organizations are living organisms, then what is your role? Are you the white blood cell, that kills

off the cancer? Are you the skin that protects the organism from the ravages of the outside world? Are you the blood that delivers oxygen to all parts of the organism? Or are you the sensing part, the eyes and ears, that see danger or opportunity ahead? Whatever role you play, know this: **You are part of something larger.** We are each part of a human system. It's not possible to be human and not be part of something larger.

If you forget, you will be reminded by your own loneliness.

In his book, *The Living Company*, Arie De Geus talks about companies who have been in existence for over a lifetime—for 100 years or more. It's a select group. Even the most stellar of companies in the 20th century have met an unforetold death 30 or 40 years later, when their glory days have long passed. De Geus argues that the companies who have survived for what seems an eternity in the business world are the ones whose purpose has been to create a community, not to make money. I flinch when I think of how heretical that must seem to people in business. And what I know to be true is that people, employees, yearn to be part of a community, to belong to something larger than themselves.

What can you do to strengthen the bonds of community at work?

Tell stories. Stories seep into the bones. People remember stories. Tell stories to express what cannot be expressed in numbers and facts. Tell stories to connect the threads that are hanging loose around each of our necks, ready to be woven into a rich tapestry of meaning. If you tell a story, you will capture the attention of those who cannot see far enough down the road to discover that it is a dead end, those who have been heads down for so long that the task has become more important than the purpose. When things become confused and chaotic, ask yourself, "What is the story here? And who am I being in the story?"

Trust people to be able to hear the truth. Whatever it is that you are afraid of saying is what needs to be said. Don't settle for the easy path, the path of least resistance when it comes to communicating with others. Your staff, your peers, your managers will all thank you for being direct and having the confidence in them that they can handle anything, even the stuff that's hard to hear.

Ask deep questions. And be willing to hear the answers. Be the truth-teller, the person who calls out the elephant in the room, when everyone else wants to hide under the table. Organizations need to live in reality, not in their egos. Be beholden only to your conscience, to your heart. Ask yourself, "What do I know to be true right now?"

Look for the gold in each person, if you want to have a chance at mining jewels and not junk. If you look for jewels, you'll find jewels. If you look for junk, you'll find more junk than you know what to do with.

A friend gave me this quote that summed up her approach to work:

"When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever. In its place is something that you have left behind. Let it be something good."

Let your own place in the work world be something good. The world is waiting for you.

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