

Making a Stand: the Human Spirit at Work Pt.7

The architect and developer (Allan) from the previous articles did eventually hire the third stone cutter (Francis), with the clear expectation that he would be able to create a team of inspired stone cutters - those who wanted to become craftsmen. Francis in turn hired two stone cutters and put them straight to work.

George (the new project manager) stands at the door of Allan's office. Allan puts down his pen, waves him in and says "George, I'm really disappointed we couldn't bring Francis over the line because no doubt he's a great craftsman".

"Well, we gave it our best shot, and we did provide him with regular feedback. We explained many times that it wasn't just about his craftsmanship but more about his leadership," responds George "more to the point, his attitude didn't encourage or support craftsmanship in others."

"Yeah, but it still disappoints me that we..." Allan stops abruptly as Francis appears at the door, walks in and sits.

"Francis, George and I..."

"You're going to sack me, right?" interrupts Francis.

"Well, two weeks from today you will have been with us for three months and we aren't going to renew your contract."

"OK, but the end is the same isn't it. I have no job, right?" retorts Francis with an air of cynicism.

"You're right Francis but ..."

"Ah but! Let's just say we don't see things the same way. You guys want me to pussyfoot around people, while accepting shoddy workmanship. Yes, I am a perfectionist and I like things done right. I also make sure others know what standards I have and, yes, some guys have left because I am tough. So what! I have been in this game for 25 years and you know I am the best stone worker around. This is not good enough!" Barks Francis.

As Francis draws breath, George breaks in... "We're giving you two weeks advanced pay with all your entitlements, and we're sorry that it hasn't work out but we want you to finish up today. As you say Francis, we just see things differently". He hands Francis his pay packet.

Francis snatches the envelope and walks out. There is nothing else to say.

Drawing the line: a question of performance or spiritual development

As the above encounter demonstrates, it isn't just a difference of opinion or who is right or wrong; it is about what you think is important. There is nothing like 'drawing the line' to clarify what you and your business stands for. Though we could say a lot about verbal styles, or the positions that all three men took, it is the actions we take that create the moment. Actions flow from what we think at the time - and the wisdom (or otherwise) of them is determined by the quality of our minds. The critical ingredient to having a calm state of mind is Self-awareness or consciousness. It is this that provides greater perspective and clarity in the best and worst of circumstances. It is our inner life - our thinking, our spiritual ability, which determines our actions.

As George bursts into Allan's office he says, "Allan, have a read of this for a minute." He hands over a rather dirty and crinkled piece of paper. Sitting back in his chair Allan starts to read:

Picture a martial artist kneeling before the master sensei in a ceremony to receive a hard-earned black belt. After years of relentless training, the student has finally reached a pinnacle of achievement in the discipline.

"Before granting the belt, you must pass one more test" says the sensei. "I am ready" responds the student, expecting perhaps one final round of sparring.

"You must answer the essential question: What is the true meaning of the black belt?"

"The end of my journey," says the student "a well-deserved reward for all my hard work."

The sensei waits for more. Clearly, he is not satisfied. Finally, he speaks. "You are not yet ready for the black belt. Return in one year."

A year later, the student kneels again in front of the sensei. "What is the true meaning of the black belt?" asks the sensei.

"A symbol of distinction and the highest achievement in our art" says the student.

The Sensei says nothing for many minutes, waiting. Clearly, he is not satisfied. Finally, he speaks. "You are still not ready for the black belt. Return in one year."

A year later, the student kneels once more in front of the sensei and again he is asked "What is the true meaning of the black belt?"

"The black belt represents the beginning - the start of a never-ending journey of discipline, work, and the pursuit of an ever-higher standard" says the student.

"Yes. You are now ready to receive the black belt and begin your work."

Allan raises his eyes, puzzled and curious "Yes, and your point is?"

"In our post-discussion yesterday," says George "after letting go of Francis, we both suggested that we needed to look at the qualities, attitudes and leadership expectations we need to put into the job description before we find a replacement. But I've been wondering, what critical leadership qualities were missing in the way Francis lead his team?"

Expectantly, Allan waits for George to explain...

"Then I came across that story and I realised that Francis hadn't been prepared to be a student. Yes, he was a skilled craftsman and yes, he'd had many years of experience. He'd become a black belt in his craft if you like. But we wanted more... Go to any pre-school or early primary school classroom and you'll see in the faces of the students the desire to learn. But what is at the heart of being a student?"

George picks up a pen, approaches the white board and writes...

WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF BEING A STUDENT?

- Being open to learning
- Being curious about what is not yet known
- Being ready to experiment and trial ideas without fear of being wrong

"George," interrupts Allan "I know there's a point to all this, but I'm not sure what you're getting at. Can you come to the point?"

"Well," says George "Francis, as a leader, was not able to engage people in such a way that they could stay open to learning. That's the point! What I've learnt from you yourself is that I am keen to keep learning about myself, my job, how to enhance relationships - personal and working - and keep a healthy and enquiring attitude to almost everything."

Allan is surprised by George's forthrightness but George continues... "You often speak of being inspired and feeling a sense of awe at seeing your buildings. Also, you speak to me about the great feeling you experience when you see people finding 'the craftsman within' and translating that into our buildings. If we are not open to being a student it's not possible to be inspired. And in the story, the Sensei was asking his student to appreciate that his considerable achievements were only the beginning. He wanted him to appreciate the power of being a learner/student, of his craft and of life."

After a long pause Allan says, "You're right George. So what do we do to bring this through to everyone, including our next master craftsman?"

This is a question that challenges many people in business. Keeping open and continuing to learn are both spiritual questions - about our inner world and the dynamics of noticing our closedness or openness. Drawing lines are moments when we either invite inner openness and see the point - or walk away without a second glance. ■ ■

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