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Can Pay it Forward "Work" in Business?

While on the phone with my mom the other day, she mentioned the concept of "pay it forward". While thinking of several events of late, I realized it would be interesting to discuss whether this is a fluffy concept or whether it really "works".

Several years ago, there was a movie called "Pay it Forward" - I don't remember the details but I enjoyed it, and the concept of paying it forward (doing a kind act and expecting that the next person will return the favor by doing a kind act for someone else) "worked". Of course, you'd hope so since it was a movie! I've seen numerous examples which illustrate that this concept "works" in business life just as well as in personal life.

Interestingly, when you think about this in business, it typically requires significantly more trust as the stereotype is that "everyone is out for themselves". Unfortunately, I find a lot of people with this attitude; however, there are still gems in the rough who think of paying it forward. When this person is a leader, it is obvious how respected he/she is as compared to the norm. And, if this person isn't a leader, more often than not, he/she becomes an informal leader.

For example, one person spent a significant amount of precious time helping a co-worker understand a topic required for a significant project the co-worker was responsible to accomplish. Not only did this not get credited to the person but it also caused her to work additional hours from home to ensure her work was completed. Since it was a key company priority, paying it forward worked both from a personal perspective (the co-worker felt more comfortable) and from a business perspective (since it directly contributed to a company priority).

In another example, during a job transition in a past life, a peer took it upon himself to actively search for ways to help me regardless of how it would help or hinder his career progress - and we weren't especially close at the time (and actually had a few conflicts over the years). I found it really interesting that a few of my closer colleagues went out of their way for me, a few other close colleagues dropped me like a sour fish and a not-especially close colleague went over the top to help me. Of course, he is now a close colleague as I'm half smart (as a friend of mine likes to say). There was no doubt that he did it in a pay it forward type thinking. And it "worked" - he helped me obtain a website address I couldn't find, sent helpful information continually etc.

Last but not least, a friend has had a series of events occur, any one of which could be considered extremely stressful yet she has maintained a positive attitude and has experienced several people (some who she knew and some who she had never met before) who paid it forward. For example, one person who she had never met before was driving by, stopped and offered to give my friend all sorts of furniture she thought might be useful for her. Another woman she had never met before offered to search her house for an old, no-longer-published catalogue and drop it off while in the neighborhood. Another group of low-paid service workers gave her extra service which likely was partially if not fully paid for from their personal funds. And the list goes on...

So, how can you pay it forward?

1. **Keep your eyes open.** Many times, it's as simple as looking for opportunities to pay it forward. If you run through life with a lot of your mind (who doesn't?) and cannot see what's happening in front of you, you could miss countless opportunities to pay it forward. Instead, open your eyes.
2. **Prioritize time.** As my consulting mentor says, it's never a lack of funds; it's a lack of priority for how whatever funds are available is spent. It's the same with paying it forward. Taking the time to pay it forward is what counts. Prioritize your time.
3. **Don't delay.** Lastly, paying it forward is "in the moment". It cannot take a thorough analysis or excessive time to think about it. Instead, go with your gut and pay it forward. The woman driving by in a car made a quick decision to pull over. If she thought further, she'd have missed the opportunity.

Why not end the summer with a focus on paying it forward?

Lisa's Tips: Project Management Keys

I write a monthly article on project management for [Project Times](#), and so I thought I'd compile a few of the best tips in this month's newsletter:

1. **Project leader** - as my HR mentor says, it begins and ends with leadership. This is no different when it comes to project management. Yet there is a scarcity of effective leaders - hang on to your good ones!
2. **The project goal** - why are you doing the project? Why does it matter? When the project team understands the answers to these questions and how they fit into the big picture, they are significantly more productive.
3. **Planning** - often, business leaders are in such a rush for results that they overlook the importance of project planning. Developing a good plan can make or break a project.
4. **Proactive communication** - one of the keys to success is communicating just before a critical task comes up and following up on the task.
5. **Rewards & recognition** - catch people doing right!

Recommended Reading

Trade magazines - I've found trade magazines to be quite valuable in staying up-to-date on the latest trends and events in whichever industries and/or trade associations are relevant to your business. Often time, bits and pieces of information from a trade magazine gives me ideas which eventually turn into something of value - a result for a client or a germ of research for an article, etc.

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