The Value of Considerate Conduct

Libby V. Morris

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I remember getting my first full-time job after college, and I of course considered it below my skills and qualifications. However, I was young and had much to learn about careers and workplaces and the habits and experiences of others. As I was describing my job to my father, he proceeded to ask me several questions, a practice he used often and effectively. I will never forget the question, “What is the most important thing to do in your job?” Of course, I proceeded to rattle off what the job entailed. He said “Fine, sure, ok,” but “what is the most important thing?.” With a bit of exasperation, I began to name many important job-related skills such as being on time, working hard, doing quality work, and so on—all of which he readily admitted were important and necessary, but maybe not sufficient.

So, after a frustrating pause in the conversation, when his overarching answer eluded me, he shared his belief that “your number one job is ‘to get along’ with other people.” He did not use sociological terms about group behavior or concepts from human relations and communication theory. In straightforward terms, he elaborated on the importance of building good relationships with other people and how these efforts support quality work, job longevity, and satisfaction in the workplace. He opined that no one wants to hire (or keep!) a problem person, a disgruntled and complaining person who sees the “speck in another’s eye, but cannot see the log in his or her own” (*New Testament*, Matthew 7). My father genuinely liked people, and this number one task was not so hard for him; but he must have seen many people fail because fundamentally they failed in the interpersonal dimension of work, not in ability to do the job.

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? Play fair. Say you are sorry when you hurt someone. Look and listen. This advice was captured in a best-selling book some years ago, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (Fulghum 1989). Over the years in the academy I have observed some who obviously had not learned those lessons, and their behavior and the responses of others created dysfunctional departments and toxic cultures. From my perspective, a successful career calls for the alignment of two paths: productivity and excellence in job performance and good collegueship. In my experience, poor performance in the latter makes success in the former an even stiffer uphill climb. Now, I know that

L. V. Morris (✉)

Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia, 102 Meigs Hall, Athens, GA 30602-6772, USA
e-mail: lvmorris@uga.edu

academic culture is not always supportive and that it is a high stakes and often stressful environment, especially for untenured faculty. Poor interpersonal relationships exacerbate the problem and negatively affect productivity.

Just as I was thinking about mentoring young faculty and the personal and organizational problems they encounter, the listserv “Tomorrow’s Professor”, which is sponsored by the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning, posted an article titled “Conflict: A Most Difficult Task,” (Holder 2009) by. The writer provided administrators with several conflict resolution strategies, including understanding the problem, using the principle of “least energy and changing the channel,” and developing a vision for resolution. As the Director of the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, I am always interested in ways to support and encourage faculty within my unit and to minimize unproductive conflict. Collegiality is high on my list of professional behaviors.

The book that reminded me of my father’s advice from many years ago, and launched this editorial, is titled *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* by P.M. Forni (2002), cofounder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project. The book addresses long-known lessons—pay attention, listen, speak kindly—and provides thoughtful consideration of important topics such as the drive to achieve. The real value in the book is in its explicit reminder that behaviors may be chosen and that considerate conduct, in this fast-paced, aggressive, competitive world, has value. Perhaps deliberate discussion in graduate education about professional ethics, responsibility, and considerate conduct would yield more effective future faculty. A byproduct might be more effective departments where faculty members collectively respect the work and behaviors of others.

So, in the upcoming days I will begin to look at our doctoral program to uncover the spoken and unspoken messages we communicate about life in the academy and our individual responsibilities for considerate behavior and civility. Parker Young, University of Georgia Professor Emeritus of higher education and specialist in law, always ended his presentations with these words of advice. As you carry out your roles in the academy, you may not always know the correct action; but you should always, always remember this: Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you (the Golden Rule). He would often repeat the statement for added emphasis. Good advice, my father would say.

Three things in human life are important: The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind, and the third is to be kind.

Henry James

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