

What Losing My Job Taught Me About Leading

by Douglas R. Conant | 8:00 AM March 18, 2013

• [Comments \(92\)](#)

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It was the spring of 1984. I remember the day as if it were yesterday. It was a beautiful morning on Boston's North Shore and I could smell the sea air as I drove to my job as the Director of Marketing for The Parker Brothers Toy and Game Company. When I arrived, I was greeted by the Acting Vice President of Marketing and asked to step into his office. Our company had recently changed ownership and things had been a little chaotic, but I still felt good about my ability to contribute. But once I was in the Vice President's office, I learned that my position had been eliminated — and that I needed to pack up my belongings and leave the building immediately. In other words, I was fired. Ten years of my career was over in a snap. I was devastated and I was bitter. I went home to my wife, my two very small children, and my one very large mortgage... feeling every bit the victim.

Fortunately, the new owners had set me up with a fabulous outplacement person, Neil MacKenna. Neil was a wonderful, crusty New Englander who didn't tolerate a "victim" mentality for a minute. With Neil's guidance, losing my job became a valuable learning experience about what leadership should be. For some, these thoughts may constitute a "blinding glimpse of the obvious." But I have found them extraordinarily powerful in their simplicity.

First, I learned the power of connecting with people by being fully present — in every moment. Neil's first words to me were "How can I help?" During every one of our meetings, he listened so intently and earnestly. He wasn't trying to guide the conversation and he was not at all judgmental. His interest clearly came from a genuine desire to understand and to help. Neil was fully present in every moment, in a sincere and earnest way.

Too many leaders are so caught up in the momentum of work that they lose sight of the opportunity to connect with people. I discovered that the more fully present I was with other people, the more fully present they were with me, and the more productive our relationship became over time.

This is easier said than done (it takes a lot of mindfulness to keep your mind from wandering, or your gaze from flicking to your watch or your phone) but it's essential to honoring people — another lesson I learned from Neil.

He "honored" me with his time, his attention, his insight and his energy. He also proposed that I honor all the people who crossed my path. More specifically, he had me think about the people who had honored me along my life journey and challenged me to become more like them with the people with whom I lived and worked.

I have found that the more I honored others, the more they honored me and the more fulfilling my career became. In the business arena, I have been surrounded by people with awesome skills. The difference between good and great is determined by the mindset you choose to bring to the work. The concept of honor should be part of that mindset.

And when someone does help you, acknowledge it. Get the name of every single person with whom you interact, from the head of the company to the receptionist. Find a way to connect with them, use their first name and look for something unique about them. When I would leave the building after a job interview, I'd walk next door to the coffee shop and hand-write notes to each person I met and mail them within 24 hours. You can write something as simple as, "Thank you for your help today. I was a little bit confused and really appreciate your help." Personally acknowledging their work sets you apart as a candidate — and later on, as a leader. If you cultivate a relationship in a genuine, thoughtful way, people will be more inclined to want to help you even though they don't have to help you.

When you're connecting with people, honoring them, and thanking them for their contributions, you'll naturally find yourself with a larger network — something you need not only to find a job, but to lead effectively once you have a new job.

Before I was fired, I had kept my head down and on my work. As a result, I was sadly disconnected to the business world beyond the company. I felt remarkably alone.

Neil told me to build a network of people to solicit ideas and advice for my job search. Then I was to cultivate that network with the hope of identifying some job opportunities and using some of these people as my references. The time to build a network is always before you need one. It took me an extra six months to find a job because I had to build a network from scratch before I could really ramp up my search for a job.

Even after you secure your next job, keep in touch with these people. Maintain thoughtful relationships with people who can help you think through big issues throughout your career. Vigilantly try to be helpful to many of the people who had been so helpful to you. Over the years, I've had the opportunity to more than repay their kindness.

Finally, I would challenge you to be alert to the Neil MacKennas in your life. Learn from them and grow with them. They will help transform your executive life as you endeavor to help and honor the people with whom you work. Yes, losing my job was one of the most difficult things to go through but, in hindsight, it was one of the best experiences of my life.