

STINGINESS, GENEROSITY¹, AND INDULGENCE STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of generosity. When we lead with exceptional generosity, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not generous enough, people may not follow their leaders and become less productive. When leaders are too generous, people may lose focus of their goals and take advantage of their leaders.

Leading with exceptional generosity is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of generosity between stinginess and indulgence. It is difficult because a generous action in one situation is not a generous action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit generosity, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional generosity, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being generous and of failing to be generous. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional generosity, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of generosity, these stories may also be used for discussions about altruism, beneficence, or magnanimity.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was generous?
2. How could the people in this story have been more generous? How could they have been exceptionally generous?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Ameena Al-Jaber

In my department there is a sense of competition and withholding information rather than reaching out and helping one another. We are overwhelmed, and could benefit from sharing information, spreading work around, or using shared learnings, but apparently everyone wants to be the “one who knows” to our customers or our managers. They cannot be the “one who knows” if other people know as well. They think, “I had to learn this the hard way, and so should you.”

I realized that I could be the one to start changing this mentality. I made a conscious decision to lead by example. I wrote a memo to explain what I had recently learned about an issue that was applicable to nearly all team members. In the memo, I explained the issue I faced, the steps I took to address it, and the final outcome.

To my surprise and delight, another co-worker (who sits only a few feet away) replied to everyone on my email saying that he was also working through a similar issue. He explained how this information could help the cut time off from our overall project development. A few others also sent encouraging responses, and one team member even suggested that we should have a meeting to discuss my memo, and that perhaps the meeting could be a regular one in which we discuss topics about which we all need to learn.

The only obstacle I faced came from a senior team member, who scoffed at me for sharing my valuable and hard-earned insight. He also said that he did not want a million emails about things that do not directly involve him. I listened to his complaints and then explained to him that if we got better at sharing and working together, we would have less problems for him to solve and less teaching he would have to do with the junior team members. He could use that time to focus on more important issues. He was still undecided about the idea after I explained that to him, but I think he is just accustomed to the norm. As the group benefits more and more from sharing I think he will come around.

Story #2: Deborah Nikkel, Assistance Director

We implemented a new job classification framework called “Career Tracks” that was mandated by the Office of the President (OP). All ten campuses and five Medical Centers in our system were required to adopt the framework according to the OP timeline. The idea was to take a more organized approach to classifying jobs and creating career paths within job families that standardized jobs, levels, tiers, and roles and responsibilities, along with expected competencies for the many thousands of jobs through the entire sprawling organization. I was called in to help with change management efforts because all the involved parties, including the HR community, were struggling with our campus implementation.

When I took over, it was immediately clear to me that the tools, job aids and templates that OP provided were inadequate to meeting to the challenges we faced in introducing this new approach to the classification of jobs. OP is a policy making body but has little or no experience implementing their policies among the complex cultures inherent in the multi-billion-dollar enterprise that included our campus and Medical Center. I started by creating an overall strategy and identified tools we would need to develop and approaches we would need to take to successfully implement and then I facilitated various meetings with our stakeholders to get buyin. We clarified the strategy and the roles and responsibilities of team members from different parts of the organization; from there we created templates and tools that were oriented toward the individuals whose job classifications were impacted by the change. We listened to employees, managers, and HR professionals and identified areas where there would be resistance. For example, one of the things that employees were upset about was that there were fewer opportunities to be promoted because a job family that once had as many as ten levels, now had only four or five. Granted, the salary ranges were wider, but people were used to getting promoted, and now that was less likely. Campuses who had previously introduced this new framework arbitrarily placed individuals into the new structure and announced the change. We developed an approach and set of tools that enabled managers to discuss the new framework with each employee; further we created methods for employees who felt their new job title was wrong to register their complaints with Human Resource professionals. We created videos, we had office hours, we saw hundreds of people, and we made sure people felt heard and that they had a place to go to articulate their concerns and negotiate a more appropriate classification if necessary.

The implementation leads at the Office of the President saw what we were doing and said, “You guys are doing things that no one else has done! This is now the best practice. We love it. Can we use your stuff?” We said, “Of course! Take all of our stuff and use it!” They did.

Story #3: Lau Dawei, Analytical Consultant

I was assigned to take on a complex project that required me to answer over thirty questions from one of my internal client teams. My teammate told me that this client was much more difficult to deal with than others based on her previous experience. When I contacted this

team to ask them to clarify one of the questions, I initially received no response. After four days, a different team member responded and told me that I could have consulted with my own teammates before asking him. I was offended by his response, so I avoided communicating with this team and worked on the project alone. After weeks of intense work, I finished this project, but I failed to answer the questions that my client cared about the most.

I thought through the mistakes I made on this project. First, I let other people's negative words affect me. Second, I judged people before I met them. Third, I overreacted to criticism that was, in fact, reasonable. Fourth, I misunderstood my client's goals, and this led to miscommunication. I stopped communicating with my client before I started working. In fact, I found out that the client who responded to my request for information had not intentionally ignored me, but had, in fact, been on maternity leave. That is why the response took four days.

When I was assigned with another project from the same client team, I decided to do better. I made it a point to not be judgmental. I sent an email to the clients, apologizing missing important questions in the former project, and telling them that I wanted to understand their needs before starting the new project. The team leader responded by saying that they understood and they looked forward to working with me again.

I found a technical problem which made their database inaccessible to me, so I had to contact this client team again. I was worried about how soon they would respond because their technical person was out of office. The team leader helped me fix the problem within ten minutes. After that, I never hesitated to communicate again.

Story #4: Keandra Blake, Wellness Director

My counterpart at another branch in my organization who was competitive with me, even though our organization was collaborative, our managers discouraged us from working in silos, and there was nothing inherently competitive about our work. Even so, she would not share ideas and in some cases, she took aggressive action to undermine me and my work.

Because of her known behaviors, I tried to avoid her. However, she began structuring her department similarly to mine, and then started asking if the high-performing staff in my branch could train the new staff who occupied similar positions in her branch. My knee-jerk reaction was to respond to her with language that would have gotten me fired. I overcame my initial reaction and decided that her requests were an opportunity for me to show her why we collaborate, but I did so apprehensively.

My counterpart arranged to send one of her staff people to my branch for training, but when I sent an email to her, asking for specifics about the issues upon which we should focus, she never responded.

I spent the weekend fuming that I would have to completely improvise with this person, and that she did not see my time as valuable. However, I took some time to think through the situation. I wanted to create a mutually respectful relationship. I recognized that she may not have had time to respond to my email. I acknowledged that if this were anyone else in the organization, I would not jump to conclusions. I re-committed to do my best with training her staff member.

I trained my counterpart's staff person to the best of my ability. After he returned, I received the sincerest communication from my counterpart that I ever have. She thanked me profusely for taking the time to help her staff when I was in no way obligated to do that. Her email said that her staff member, "came back yesterday with so much energy and excitement in his voice" and "I can't thank you both [my staff member who assisted me with this and I] enough for allowing him to come and use your time and facility to learn and see how effective he can be in his role." She went on to compliment my staff person and call him a "superhero" for breaking down some complex processes for her staff person. This was huge for her, as normally she vocalized nothing but fault in my methods.

This situation was actually pretty huge. Over time, I became friends with my counterpart. We banded together and used the fact that we ran the two largest branches of our organization to create some needed but disruptive changes. We knew these changes would not be appreciated by the "old boys club" in our organization, but that they were good for the organization. We were willing to take the risk together because we could see that women in our organization were never promoted above director, so we would not pursue our long-term careers within the organization. After making all the changes we could, we both left the organization. If I had not had a partner in this, I doubt I would have been empowered to make the changes we did, and I would not have had a partner if I had not taken the risk to train her staff members.