

## CONTEMPT, RESPECT<sup>1</sup>, AND OBSEQUIOUSNESS STORIES<sup>2</sup>

### 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 respect. When we lead with exceptional respect, 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 respectful enough, people may become resentful of their leaders and become disengaged with their work. When leaders are too respectful, people may take advantage of their leaders and produce lower quality work.

Leading with exceptional respect is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of respect between contempt and obsequiousness. It is difficult because a respectful action in one situation is not a respectful action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit respectful, 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 respectful, 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 respectful and of failing to be respectful. (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 respect, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of respect, these stories may also be used for discussions about civility and courtesy.

<sup>2</sup> 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 respectful?
2. How could the people in this story have been more respectful? How could they have been exceptionally respectful?
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: Anna Hitron, Oncology Pharmacy Specialist and Family Member**

My family owned a profitable business that was founded by my grandfather, and we were considering the possibility of selling it. My relatives and I had different opinions about whether we should sell the business. We had meetings to discuss the issue, but it seemed to me that we argued about the same points every month. Specifically, people would bring up financial information, such as cash flow projections, and we would spend significant time trying to figure out if we agree with the projection methodology. However, no matter what method we used, the result we came to was always that the company was profitable. I tried to maintain a positive outlook when I attended these meetings, but I would usually get frustrated and quit paying attention. I would think, "I have heard all of this before." As a result, I would ignore the feelings and opinions of the other family members in the meeting.

As one of these meetings approached, I decided that I needed to change my attitude. To do this, I would need to approach the meeting differently. First, instead of debating about accounting information, I would try to discuss the issue from a 30,000-foot perspective: Why would we want to sell a profitable company? Second, I would try to do a better job of listening to my relatives, including their desire to make sure that our financial analysis was reliable and accurate. Third, I would suggest that we try some new approaches to analysis, including examining other, similar cases; asking external accountants to review our data, or bringing in a moderator to facilitate the meeting.

When the meeting began, I tried to really listen to what my family was saying. As I listened, I realized that the reason we were arguing about the methodology behind our financial valuation was not because we thought everyone else was wrong. The reason we were arguing was because we all had different goals regarding the business. Some members saw the business as an emotional tie to my grandfather and did not want to see it sold, no matter what. Others felt that the business was profitable but was not providing them with enough income (with differing opinions as to what was "enough"). Some had pretty much decided that if the business led to this

much fighting, we might as well sell no matter what. My suggestions about new ways to approach the analysis made even more sense once I understood what was going on.

By the end of the meeting, I proposed that we bring in multiple experts to our next meeting to help get everyone on the same page. I suggested that each of us should identify our personal goals in relation to the decision to keep or sell the company. My family responded and agreed that getting several experts to provide additional counsel on the accounting and valuation would be beneficial. They also agreed that if we better understood everyone's individual goals it may help us avoid fighting.

I left the meeting with a positive feeling. Though we still fought, we were at least able to discuss why we were fighting. I spoke to my siblings after the meeting, and I think they also felt that at least we were starting to understand what our differences were and how we could work around them.

## **Story #2: Amore Du Toit**

I had a high-priority project, and our team was receiving pressure to complete it quickly. My manager asked me to document the status of the project every day so we could prove that our lag was caused by another team's slow response time and was not our fault. This request seemed passive-aggressive to me. I thought if I obeyed this directive, I might end up sabotaging our project as well as making another team look bad. I wanted to actively try to be positive instead, so I decided to work around this directive. I wanted the project to be successful, and I wanted every contributor, including myself, to have every chance to succeed.

I reached out to members of the other team. I found someone from the other team who was available, and I used instant messaging to communicate with them instead of email. I let this person know that we were feeling pressure on our side to complete the project quickly (I had not said that in my previous attempts to contact them). I also let them know I had been asked to document the status of the project daily. I sent a list of specific, direct, and helpful questions using calm, respectful language. I was friendly and courteous, and because we were speaking directly, he asked me some questions that I had not answered in the emails I had already sent. He asked for a timeline, and I told him that we were feeling pressure to complete it quickly, and that it was becoming a very high priority project for the company. I phrased it that way because I did not want him to feel like I was attacking or blaming his team, but to make sure he understood that it was an important and highly visible project to the company. He agreed to speak to his managers and to his development team in person that day.

I also decided to bring up my conversation with the other team on my own team's daily call. My manager already knew about the situation, but I wanted to make sure everyone on our team knew I had spoken to the other team directly, I had informed them of our situation with the project, and they wanted a deadline from us to help them prioritize. When I told everyone this,

our business leaders realized they needed to meet with the other team's business leaders to define the scope and requirements of the project.

I feel I had a positive impact on this situation because it may have taken several more days or weeks to get the other team working on our project if I had followed my manager's advice of emailing certain developers and passive-aggressively documenting their slow response time. In the end, that approach would have brought us all under scrutiny and made us look bad. Using this approach, I was able to create a helpful working relationship with the developer from the other team and make us both look good. I was able to build bridges of communication between our teams at a higher level.

### **Story #3: Andrea Goulet, Founder and Chief Strategy Officer**

Early in the history of my company, I provided an estimate for a job to a close friend. She did not hire us right away, and when she returned a year and a half later, she said that I needed to honor the outdated pricing in the estimate I had given to her. We had not put expiration dates on our estimate, and she was pretty insistent.

I could have easily said, "No. It has been a year and a half, and our business model does not support this price." However, I felt that this was an issue of integrity, so I said yes. As a result, I ended up paying our contractors more to finish the project than I got paid, and this put us in a big hole. We had to shut down the business for a couple of years because of my actions.

I learned that part of being a leader, being an executive, is putting your own business first, setting boundaries, and not letting people walk all over you. Sometimes you have to say, "I cannot honor this anymore. It would cost me more to hire contractors for this job than you would be paying me." It would have been fine. We had not signed anything; it was just an estimate. She could not have taken anything, but I was so scared of having a difficult conversation that I let the business go under. Now we have expiration dates on all of our estimates, which I think is reasonable. Also, I no longer avoid difficult conversation because it is always easier to have the difficult conversations than to live with the consequences of avoiding the conversations.

### **Story #4: Quatesia Marshall, Program Manager**

As a member of my state's population health organization, I was working on a Change Master Team Project which was supposed to address a population health issue. Our group was made up of representatives from five different health departments and covered more than five counties. The counties and the staff were both quite diverse, and selecting a project could be challenging because we were all pretty territorial and the project was supposed to just focus on one of the five counties. Our goal was to earn the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's "Culture of Health" Prize, which recognizes communities that have placed a priority on health and are

creating powerful partnerships and deep commitments that will enable everyone, especially those facing the greatest challenges, with the opportunity to live well.

Eventually, we agreed that we would create a project focusing on needles and syringes that people drop in parks, neighborhoods, sidewalks, playing fields and other common gathering grounds. We discussed potential activities to pursue if there were available funding. We considered educational campaign on topics such as safe needle handling or what to do when you see a needle, as well as ideas such as introducing needle disposal boxes in public spaces. In theory, the educational component would be used throughout the state.

I felt that this project was my baby. I had already done my homework before pitching the idea to the group and had identified some community stakeholders that could potentially help us move forward with these efforts. When we received funding for our plan, I shared the information with my group. Everyone who had attended the earlier meeting shared congratulatory emails.

Later that day I received a call from a group member. She said she disapproved of the of the project and asked if we could identify something else to work on. She said she did not understand how our project would affect her county. I felt unappreciated and personally attacked and became upset. Everyone else understood and accepted the project! I told her I had a meeting to go to and would follow-up after. When I got back, I found an email in my inbox me from her to the whole group, beginning with “Since this was your idea ...” and then asking me some very pointed questions.

I took some time to reflect before responding. I clarified in my mind that I wanted our group to be cohesive, I value my colleagues’ expertise, and what really matters is if we improve health in our communities (not who is right or wrong). I acknowledged to myself that there may be ways in which I have been wrong about some aspects of our project or about my approach, and so I tried to have an open mind to learn from my colleague’s perspective. Once I clarified my thinking, I picked up the phone.

When I listened to her with compassion and an open mind, I learned that she felt insecure and left out because she had not had the opportunity to attend the previous meeting. She wanted the team to find her participation valuable. She felt that I had overshadowed her, which is why she responded in a challenging way. Once I understood that, I complimented her for asking questions. I also found out she was new to Public Health. I congratulated her on her new position and offered to be a friendly resource, encouraging her to reach out to me at any time.

She emailed the group back and informed them we had talked it through and she was on board with the idea. She expressed excitement about our funding opportunity and reminded our funders that the team would be working through the details of the project.