

Generosity at Work at Work

Over the years I have been solicited many times for contributions to various causes. In almost every instance I remember going through a social calculation, “How much is expected? How much will get the solicitor to think well of me? At what level will I not feel guilty for giving too little or too much? What are others giving?” So much of my giving was prompted by a need to avoid guilty feelings or embarrassment.

If I appeared generous, was I generous in those situations? In reality I must confess, “No.” As I have had to chance to reflect back on the times in my life when I was truly generous or when I was the recipient of another’s generosity, I have come to believe there is more to generosity than merely giving. The faith value, the virtue, of generosity calls for a much higher standard; it requires an attitude of freedom, of liberation, of independent power. Giving to avoid guilt or embarrassment or to enhance my job or career advancement is to be held captive by those desires. Those ends and other more noble ones such as to create a better community or to enable all to win may well be served by generosity, but the truly generous person gives because he/she is able to give and the giving is an expression of who they are and who they want to be. They give because there is a need, they are capable of satisfying the need, and it is right to do so.

Generosity at work in the workplace is partially about money although there are more opportunities to be generous with time, talent, and even attitudes. The recent actions of workers in government and private industry to accept reduced work times and wages in order to enable more workers to keep employment certainly have been acts of generosity. The bank president in Texas of a few years ago who shared millions with his employees upon his retirement did an act of generosity as did the mill owner in New England who kept his employees on payroll while his factory was being rebuilt after a disastrous fire. Those are big acts of generosity.

Daily at work we have many opportunities to be generous in small ways, ways almost certain never to be noticed. Perhaps most precious is giving our time and attention to a co-worker who has a personal or work-related need for another’s perspective or even just a chance to talk out the problem with an active listener. Perhaps easiest and most appreciated is to be liberal in giving thanks and showing appreciation for what colleagues are doing. Sometimes generosity can be sharing some special knowledge or talent that we have even though it is not in our job description to provide it, but there is a need. Generosity may be just letting someone borrow a tool, an idea, our space, or whatever.

Wherever we are in our day, at home, at work, or volunteering, in the complexities of human interaction we may often perceive ourselves to have been hurt by someone. It is all too human to hold onto these hurts—the materials I needed to do my job were not provided or were provided too late to be of use; the comments made about the way I did the job seemed unfair to me; I was ignored by the clerk at the store or by my supervisor when I tried to greet him/her. The generous person gives away any belief that there was intent to hurt.

Sometimes generosity might lie in not giving what is asked for but in enabling the one in need to provide for him/herself. Teaching others to do for themselves what you could do for them is a generous giving of nobility, of capacity to that person. It gives respect for them as a person as does your accepting any reciprocal act of generosity with gratitude.

Certainly there is generosity in sharing wealth; perhaps more important for the spirit is to share time, attention, love. When you give with joy and without strings, when you can justly say that what you give truly represents who you are, then you are generous.

“Do something for somebody everyday for which you do not get paid.” (Albert Schweitzer)

GENEROSITY — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of generosity in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of generosity in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of generosity in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based generosity in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?