

Magnanimity at Work at Work

Historians often write that it takes great events to make a great person, a great president (think Washington or Lincoln), or a great prime minister (think Churchill). Greatness of spirit or magnanimity seems obviously theirs. How can a “little” person like me live with magnanimity? In our ordinary cultural understanding of magnanimity or being magnanimous, we often connect it with great events, great tasks, exposed to the whole world. So, most of us leave magnanimity for others as we live our more or less obscure lives.

Yet it just may be that the more or less obscure parts of our lives provide the greatest opportunity and need for magnanimity. Webster’s dictionary defines magnanimity as “loftiness of spirit enabling one to bear trouble calmly, to disdain meanness and revenge, and to make sacrifices for worthy ends.” I think about the situations and irritations of daily life as a spouse, a parent, a friend, an employee. Inevitably there are troubles to be borne, urges for meanness or revenge toward those with whom we live or work, and calls upon us for sacrifices to benefit our families, our work communities, or our broad civic communities. Mostly we do what is right because it is the right or good thing to do. So where does magnanimity come in?

It is not the greatness of the result which makes our actions magnanimous, but the greatness of the spirit and soul which inspires those actions. It comes from our spirit, from our attitude, our intentions. The intention of a magnanimous person is to continuously, daily strive to be better as a person, partner, co-worker, family and community member. It lies in not settling for being good enough but in seeking to be ever better, to be excellent. So the breadwinners who do not like the work they do but go to it daily and do it to the best of their abilities in order to provide sustenance for their families are examples of magnanimity. So too are parents who miss the challenge and rewards of employment but who stay home to provide the best possible care for their children. In the same category are immigrants who leave the comfort of birthplace and family, go to a foreign land taking any work they can get and suffering the innumerable slights that go with being the “different” person in the new land so as to provide a better life for their children.

Magnanimity can be about great actions in times of great events. The key is the motive for the person taking the actions. Such magnanimity can bring great honor. If the honor is the motive, then it is not magnanimity inspiring the actor. When the motivation is directed outside the actor toward the betterment of the community, then magnanimity is the inspiration. The honors may come but they are not the reason for the effort by the actor.

Another, more contemporary meaning for magnanimity is to be generous in giving to others and in forgiving those who offend us. To truly be magnanimous these actions must be done for the good of the other person and/or the community. If they are done for personal recognition or praise, magnanimity has no part of it. For the magnanimous person the honors may come but they were not sought.

Magnanimity may involve time, effort, freely giving of talent, and/or money. The point is both the persistent giving, the persistent striving for excellence in personal life, and in the persistent striving to improve the lives of those around us.

We can each be magnanimous where we are, doing what we do if we endeavor daily to be better than the day before at what we do for others. In Christ, we are great spirits made for great things.

MAGNANIMITY — A Faith Based Value at Work

1. What does applying the faith-based value of Magnanimity in your workplace (home, employment, volunteer) 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 Magnanimity in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. How do/could you apply the concept of Magnanimity in your workplace(s)?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based Magnanimity 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?