Rearview Mirror Leadership

Some things you just don't see coming. Like a traffic jam on the staircase of your own home!

When our two oldest grandsons, Charlie and Dillan, were toddlers, they had an unstoppable attraction to our stairs. When they would visit our home, these two little hockey pucks — all momentum, no brakes — were drawn to them like magnets. Climbing up came easy. Backing down was another matter entirely. And that's when the traffic jams occurred! It was hilarious to watch these two little cousins figuring out how to navigate in reverse. (At one point, I thought about borrowing some orange traffic cones from CalTrans!)

Well, what is true for kids learning to explore is true for leaders learning to lead well. There are times when squeezing in the clutch and smoothing the transmission into REVERSE is not only a good idea, but a vital and necessary one.

Leading in reverse is when you hit the pause button and head to the locker room to review some game film.

Over the years, I have facilitated meetings where gracious words gave way to sharp ones — comments lobbed like grenades nobody asked for. These unwelcomed and counterproductive skirmishes give rise to leading in reverse — some after-action response.

In one such situation, at the close of the meeting, I asked to meet with the offending/offended parties for some moments of postgame reflection. I have vivid memories of what happened in that conversation and beyond because it was a beautiful thing. Tossing their own penalty flags, both individuals quickly named and owned their harmful words and actions. They reconciled with each other. From there, they sent emails to the other meeting participants, calling out the resolution. And finally, when we gathered for our next weekly meeting, we took several minutes to call out the lessons learned.

You know, leading in reverse, among other things, takes humility. It's admitting that I have a long way to go. It's inviting others to help me discover my blind spots. And even beyond that, it is giving voice to the times when I really know the right thing to do, but regrettably choose not to do it.

From my seat, one of the most important statements in the New Testament regarding leadership, especially when it comes to leading in reverse, is: God opposes the proud but favors the humble (James 4:6). (BTW: Any debate on which side of the ledger YOU want to be on?!)

God loves it when we stare into the rearview mirror to candidly and humbly assess our hearts, our actions, our words, our attitudes, our lives. And when we do so, He rushes in with His favor and grace — something I certainly need and certainly can't live without.

As a fellow traveler, I've collected a few reflective questions that help me to lead in reverse.

- Where is God in this current set of circumstances? How might I be prone to miss Him and His voice in the details?

- What is the life and leadership “takeaway” presented here that will serve me well in the days ahead if I grab it and toss it into my toolkit?

- With whom do I need to process this event to maximize the greatest benefit from it?

- How can this situation be showcased as a learning moment for the rest of those in whose lives I have influence?

Leading in reverse is the essential antidote to fast-tracking through life and forfeiting the moments — both large and small — where God quietly offers a personal invitation to learn and experience something new about Himself and how He works.

So in a world of life and leadership where we spend the majority of our hours in FORWARD, don’t forget to shift into REVERSE from time to time. These deliberative moments will make you a better person. And a better leader.

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