

■ Learning Respect in the Arizona Desert

by Tom Terez

I used to hang out with a motorcycle gang. It lasted only an hour, but what an hour.

It all started when I left the Grand Canyon for a rental-car drive to Las Vegas. Surely my half-full tank of gas would be sufficient. Even if it wasn't, surely there would be gas stations aplenty along the way.

I saw wondrous things during that drive: towering rock formations, delicate flowering cacti, an open view as far as the eye could see. And as far as I could see, there wasn't a single gas station anywhere. Pretty soon I didn't give a damn about the rocks or the cacti or whatever the heck the plural of cactus was or is. All my attention focused on the fuel gauge and that looming E. And in the middle of such beautiful country, which inspires soaring hopes and dreams, all I hoped for was a big reserve tank.

It wasn't. And just when I thought my luck couldn't get any worse, my car sputtered to a stop within a stone's throw of ten or so resting bikers, none of whom looked like they had shaved for a decade.

Let me pause this story for some important background information. Having grown up in Maple Heights, Ohio (town motto: "Just like

Mayberry, only not as wild"), I didn't get much exposure to bikers. In fact, a "biker" was someone who drove a basket- and bell-equipped Huffy or Schwinn. So when several of the bikers walked up to my car in the Arizona desert, I took a deep breath, gripped the steering wheel, squared my shoulders, and promptly made an idiot out of myself by uttering these words: "Sure is a nice view."

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Instead of laughing in my face—an impressive show of respectful restraint, if you ask me—the bikers asked where I was from, welcomed me to Arizona, and offered to help. One of them raced off to the one gas station that's located in all of northern Arizona, and I spent the waiting time with nine others, talking and laughing and feeling entirely too clean-shaven. And you know what? We had a great conversation. It got to the point where I wanted to hold off on Vegas and head for the nearest tattoo parlor.

Before long, I drove away with a couple gal-

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■ Learning Respect in the Arizona Desert *continued*

lons of gas, side-road directions to an open station, and a powerful lesson in respect. For years, whenever I saw a biker, I'd make a harsh value judgment. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I didn't have much respect for them. Now, my respect runs so deep I could be their public-relations director. I'm still tattoo-free, but the lesson will stick with me forever.

Interestingly, the words "respect" and "regard" (as in "how I regard you") are derived from Latin and French words that capture various nuances of the verb "to look." How appropriate. When I look at you, or when you look at me, what kind of quick judgments are made? Sure, respect (or the lack thereof) ultimately manifests itself as an action; it comes across in what we say or do or not do. But it originates between our ears. And it's in that very personal space that we have our biggest opportunity to increase the

nificantly, the workplace is more pleasant. If I truly respect you and we happen to cross paths, expect a warm greeting.

Okay, so a workplace is not quite akin to a barren stretch of Arizona highway. But respect is respect, wherever you are, and it's always an inside-out proposition. If you want to get it, you have to give it. And to give it, you first have to pay attention to those thoughts and judgments and notions that are ever incubating in your gray matter. If you're sorting people into mental file folders—"important," "not so important," "totally worthless," and so forth—you're setting yourself up to be an accessory to disrespect. Ditch the file folders, and start thinking and doing anew.

But how? Here are some ideas:

- Don't wait for the proverbial empty gas tank to act on this. Start conversations with some of the people you've filed away into one of the less desirable folders. Perhaps there's a functional area or office or section you've tended to hold

Don't wait for the proverbial empty gas tank to [take action on this](#).

level of respect in our workplaces.

More on that in just a second. First, ponder this vision: In a meaningful workplace, everyone holds everyone in high regard, regardless of what they see (tie, big office, fancy car) and what they know (several advanced degrees, big title, close friend of the CEO) about each other. Decisions that affect employees are made with greater care. People's opinions are valued, and so are their judgment and know-how. When there's conflict, it's worked out in a way that keeps everyone's esteem intact. And not insig-

in low regard. Or maybe it's an individual. Take the initiative and engage them in dialogue.

- Organize a conversation with colleagues on the topic of respect. What does it mean to each of you? How do you know when it's thriving? What are the warning signs when respect is waning? Questions like these will prompt people to share their respect-related stories from past and present work situations. All of this will give life, meaning, and a remarkable degree of tangibility to an otherwise hazy concept.

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- As one of your general working principles, apply the equivalent of “due process” in the workplace. When negative situations arise and the fingers of blame start pointing, operate under the assumption that people are innocent until proven otherwise.

- Look for opportunities to address respect in any formal or informal conversations regarding vision, mission, values, goals, or working principles. Somewhere in there, respect should be strongly implied or better yet, explicitly stated and (to the degree possible) defined.

- Take a visible, vocal stand against disrespect wherever it rears its ugly head. If you’re in a meeting where people are unfairly disparaging

someone’s hard work, speak up in their defense. If another session finds someone strategizing on how to sneak a new policy by the employees, again, speak up in favor of openness and honesty. And when you’re in a one-on-one situation where someone’s comments or behavior strikes you as disrespectful, again, take a deep breath and give them a diplomatic piece of your mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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