

Blog Transcript – At the End of the Game, the King and the Pawn Go Back in the Same Box
October 10th, 2019

Hello everybody. Dennis Engelbrecht with The Family Business Institute, and our blog series, Digging Deeper. Welcome to today's session.

Today I want to talk about really the confluence of three stories and the lesson behind those. The first story, and I may have told this in some previous blogs, but about, it must be 17, 20 years ago, a long-term client, a mechanical contractor asked me to come in and analyze why some of their project teams were successful and others weren't. What were the characteristics of those team members that were consistently successful versus the others and what can we do to make everybody successful?

Well, it was a very interesting visit. So, what it really boiled down to is we had one individual and his teams were always successful. And much more successful, there is a large gap between the other teams. The project managers who worked with him most often were the most successful, and they had the most successful jobs when they were working with him, and less successful when they are working with a different superintendent. So clearly, this individual had it, whatever it is, he had it.

Now what was probably most remarkable about this individual was that he wasn't remarkable at all. So, when you interviewed him, you got no sense that this was some master planner, or huge, dominant leader who everybody wanted to follow. Very understated person, very low ego. Certainly, seemed wise, planful, had a lot of good traits, but nothing that really pointed to why they would be getting the results others weren't getting.

Now when we interviewed the folks around him and the folks who worked with him, we did hear some of those characteristics, or I guess, some of the behaviors that would lead to that. I was really struck by one particular project manager who said, "Well, when I'm on their job, oh yeah, I get my buyout done, I get my submittals in, I make sure all my purchases are exactly correct and everything's on time because I wouldn't want to disappoint him." Let's think about, "I wouldn't want to disappoint them." And I really heard similar things from everybody, which again, the unremarkable personality traits of the individual ended up with some remarkable results.

So now about two months ago, story number two, I'm presenting to a group of superintendents and project managers from a local company, about 20 folks in the room. And I'm telling this story about this unremarkable person. And one of them, one of the people I'm with starts drilling into me about his personality traits, and I was having trouble getting what he was asking about. But finally, I connected, and I realized what he was asking me about was ego. He said, "It sounds like this person didn't have that self-serving attitude and ego that some people on job sites have." And I thought about that for a second. I said, "You know, you're 100% right. They did not have that." And thus, the response he got from everybody he worked with was really quite good.

Now let's jump to story number three. About a month ago, I'm on a cruise in Europe and we spent two days in Russia, in St. Petersburg, and a lot of that time visiting the palaces of the czars. Just amazing, beautiful stuff. Gold everywhere. Great architecture and listening to the story. So, we're at dinner that night, we were with another couple. And the fella, as we were talking about the opulence the czars says, "Well, at the end of the chess game, the king and the pawn go back in the same box." And I was just sort of dumbfounded and struck. First of all, I had never heard that saying or analogy or anything. But one of the things I did was start connecting it to these two prior stories. And here's my take on that saying.

Blog Transcript – At the End of the Game, the King and the Pawn Go Back in the Same Box
October 10th, 2019

First of all... By the way, it's an old Italian proverb, and as you look it up on Google, they're saying a lot of the meaning as well. When people get dye, they get put in a box and there isn't a lot of difference once you're there. But I'd actually taken some different meeting from that. And the meaning I took from that was that really no individual, whether you're the King or the Pawn, really has more personal worth than the other.

So most of you watching this are leaders. You have a position of leadership, you have a position of management, you have a responsibility that may be greater than others. You may have a position that's higher than others and you may have a pay that's higher than others. But at the end of the day, you're no more valuable a person than each of those people that you're dealing with, whether it's the lowliest laborer on the job, or whether it's the owner, or the superintendent from the trade that you're having conflict with. Really, at the end of the day, we all have hopes and dreams and we all have flaws and we have issues. And when we go home at night, the value our families, our grandparents, our children put on us is really all the same. We all have the same value.

But in the chess game, being a chess player as a youngster, they actually had a value system. So, a pawn was worth one point and a queen was worth 10 points. Of course, the king was infinite because if you capture the king to thing is over. So, you never exchange your king. But to exchange your queen, it would have to be for 10 pawns, so to speak, to make that a good trade as you're doing that.

But really back to life here, we all have the same value. And now as I track back to that individual we are talking to, and the way that people responded to, I was able to think about that and apply that to that individual. This understated, unremarkable individual treated everybody with respect. All right. He communicated well. He was probably an introvert. He is very soft spoken again, but he treated everybody with respect. He supported his laborers, he treated the customer with respect, and if there were conflicts, he carried those through with respect. Andy did his job very, very well. So, he wasn't going to let you down. So, you didn't want to let him down. He treated you with respect. So, you treated him with respect. And I'd say one other trait that he definitely had is he had high standards, high expectations for himself and for the results of the job. I'm not going to say so much for others, but for the results he wanted to attain and for himself.

So, what happened with this individual, I think is remarkable because by him treating other people well, doing his job well, and having high standards and high expectations got amazing results. And had other people reacting off of him and doing a better job than they did with and for others.

So, when you return to your job tomorrow, or you returned to your job site and you have your team together, I encourage you to think about that. Especially in these stressful construction times, how can you get consistent great results, and what can you do to be a better leader to achieve those things? Remember, at the end of the game, the king and the pawn get put back in the same box. Thanks for tuning in.