

Shoes in the lobby



How a simple thoughtful act in a junior high school led Space2think to three principles which they believe can transform a working community

The American writer, Margaret Wheatley, tells a heartening story about a junior high school which had to be evacuated during a rainstorm. When it was safe to return to the building, the principal was the last inside and was greeted by eight hundred pairs of shoes in the lobby. In the face of a crisis, the children had independently decided what they needed to do to help take care of their shared environment. In how many other high schools would the students respond in such a thoughtful and intentional manner? It is perhaps easier to understand the young people's response when you get to know the rules the whole school community have adopted – and, rather surprisingly for an educational establishment, there are only three. However, all decisions and behaviours are based on these three rules. They are:

- take care of yourself
- take care of each other
- take care of this place

Margaret Wheatley says that “the fact that this worked so well in a junior high environment should make us all sit up and take notice!” And there is something about this moving story which compels us to think about the principles we live by within our own working communities. At Space2think we decided to follow the example the school set and adopt the same principles ourselves – adjusting the last one slightly to ‘take care of business’.

Take care of yourself

In speaking about the plight of women Michelle Obama, First Lady of the US, said, “We need to do a better job of putting ourselves higher on our own ‘to do’ list.” This is a philosophy which need not just apply to women, but to us all. We know that we need to take care of ourselves, but it never features on our ‘to do’ list. In practice, we view whatever it is that rests and refreshes us as a reward which we will deservedly enjoy once we have completed all our other tasks. But, as we know from bitter experience, the ‘to do’ list never comes to an end and we can easily fall into a routine of self-neglect. Perhaps we need to stop seeing the things we enjoy as simply a recompense for our hard work and see them more as the fuel on

which the engines of our industrious selves need to run. A practical habit of inserting acts of self-care throughout our 'to do' lists – and not just adding them on at the end – helps us to prioritise our essential maintenance.

Take care of each other

When we talk about taking care of each other our thoughts turn automatically to what we can do directly for others, such as helping them complete a task or attending a meeting on their behalf. These gestures are clearly important in creating a healthy working community, but perhaps there are more subtle ways in which we can take care of our colleagues too.

Remembering people's names and facts about their families or hobbies communicates care, as does taking time to listen. Looking at it in a fresh way, we can ask ourselves whether by doing what we usually do, are we – albeit inadvertently – not taking care of others. If you routinely take work home and send emails at unearthly hours are you, particularly if you are a leader, setting an unreasonable standard which others in your organisation will – to their detriment – feel compelled to follow? And how do you let people take care of you? Modelling how to accept help is important and helps create a co-operative and resilient working community.

Take care of business

In the simple act of removing their shoes, the children at the US junior high school demonstrated a remarkable sense of the importance of taking care of their shared environment. They instinctively understood that their school community would be a more satisfying one to be part of if they looked after their place – the school building. Our shared places are our businesses and organisations, and we must endeavour to address their needs and consciously nurture their development. This should mean that we continually question how our actions will impact the business. Do our emails communicate genuine warmth and friendliness, which will draw people to us? Do we devote time during our meetings to develop relationships which will, in the long run, be strong enough to withstand bad times as well as good? Are the expenses we incur necessary and reasonable?

Developing a culture of caring about the business begins with an individual and we must ask ourselves whether we are willing to be that individual. The outcome could be a satisfying and rewarding working community.

We feel that that adopting the 'take care' principles at Space2think has made us a stronger community because by making the effort and taking the time to consider what we do to live by the principles, we have gained a deeper awareness of ourselves and the impact of our actions. In our work helping individuals and organisations to understand themselves better we encourage and support people to slow down, question themselves and make plans. Our aspiration is that we can be a catalyst for transformation, and that the outcome of our work is the creation of working communities in which acting to take care of ourselves, others and business is as intuitive as removing wet shoes after heavy rainfall was for the children of the junior high.

Sources

1. Story of a junior high school. The Promise and Paradox of Community in *The Community of the Future* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) Margaret J. Wheatley & Myron Kellner-Rogers

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