

Wake Up and Smell the Leadership (at Starbucks)

By Ed Oakley

I was having coffee at one of my favorite [Starbucks](#) stores recently with my friend Steve Mertz when we began sharing great Starbucks experiences we had enjoyed. One of Steve's stories was inspiring and has an excellent leadership development message in it.

Steve walks with two canes, so he carries his coffee in a covered travel mug with a handle. Can you imagine trying to walk with two canes and a standard Starbucks cup? His travel cup was getting pretty old, and unbeknownst to Steve, it was leaking around the top. So, as he shuffled across the Starbucks cafe, he was leaving a decorative trail of dark roast on the floor.

Well, it just so happens that some Starbucks executives were in the store that day having a meeting... At least one of them spotted what was happening with Steve's coffee and jumped to the rescue. He hustled over to the product shelves, found just the right travel mug and approached Steve. "Sir, I think it is about time you replaced that well-used coffee mug! Would you be willing to accept this little gift from us?" he said. Steve was amazed at the gesture and graciously accepted the offer.

How do you teach that?

That's a great story and many of us have our own special experiences at Starbucks. After telling the story, though, Steve asked me, "How do you teach that?" How do you teach people to respond that way?" he was asking. Great question!

My first response was, "You don't! You hire it!" I think there is a substantial degree of truth in that, and Enlightened Leadership Solutions works with our clients to define and measure competencies for "talent selection" to assure they are hiring the right people for the job. For example, a reasonably strong "empathetic outlook" would likely be needed to have the kind of response to Steve's predicament that the Starbucks executive had. This personal skill, or competency, determines how much someone values other people.

As I continued to reflect, however, some additional thoughts surfaced about how to develop the customer service and leadership skills that executive was demonstrating.

Model the Behavior

One important way is to just model the behavior - which is exactly what the executive did that day. Can you imagine the impact on all the Starbucks partners, and customers for that matter, who witnessed that act? Modeling a desired behavior by leadership is crucial, and it has some limitations in leveragability. How else can you develop this talent that came so natural for this exec?

Sharing the Stories

A powerful tool for leadership development is sharing true stories that reflect the behaviors we consider important, that fit our corporate values. Stories like these touch the human heart and have a big impact. They cause reflection at a deep level. I'll bet a number of the Starbucks partners and customers present that day have shared that story - probably a number of times. Imagine the little impact on the image of Starbucks every time the story is shared.

When I am facilitating a leadership development session, I invite people to share their own examples of leadership or conflict resolution or problem-solving in action. Their stories are so much more powerful than mine. Recently, for example, I had just finished introducing our Framework for Leadership™ and was inviting people to share examples of how they might use it. One VP in the room, Dave Malenfant, who had been introduced to our Framework a year earlier, asked if he could share an example of how he had ALREADY used it. Sure! I exclaimed, as I grabbed my digital recorder and laid it on his table

Dave began to share a story of how he and a group of his European managers had used our Framework for Leadership to solve a major problem and save \$300,000 in one meeting. He even talked about how he wasn't sure how it would work before the meeting, and then how easy the process ended up being. Do you think that story might have influenced his colleagues? True stories are powerful teachers and influencers.

In summary, three ways to have the best leadership possible:

- Hire the right behaviors, motivations and personal skills.
- Emphasize the importance of modeling those values and behaviors.
- Tell the stories that provide the message that you want to instill.

What additional ideas do YOU have for "teaching that?" We would love to hear from you about your own experiences - your own stories!

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