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One Interaction at A Time

Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC

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One Interaction at A Time

By Cynthia Mills, FASAE, CAE, CMC; Founder, The Leaders' Haven

It's spring, and with renewal comes the chance to reshape our future through the way we engage for positive outcomes. We're in a unique moment in history with the possibility of reframing our jobs beyond the missions with which we are charged; an opportunity to use our influence to impact society one interaction at a time; to define the world we want to live in differently and to serve with distinction.

Building up human beings, who in turn use their confidence, wisdom, and engagement to do the same for others, fuels possibility. It can drive us to, not just the innovations of our time, but to the beauty of living life well together; accomplishing worthy objectives that advance humanity's spirit. Leadership is a moment by moment earned position, granted to you by others, because of their belief, trust, and evidence gathered, that you have their best interests at heart. Leadership is not aspirational just to deliver the bottom line, member benefits, and performance reviews, but to inspire engagement that develops and matures us as humans, while we create possibility.

Communication, one interaction at a time, is how we go about this, and it's such an incredibly hard thing to succeed at in life. With lazy attempts, it's why relationships break down; contracts get broken; nations fight; and why we wind up so tired. Every word we utter and every gesture we make creates the world we live in; impacting those who are on the receiving end. Each day, we write a story – a tale of how our children will remember their family when their little feet are in grown up shoes, a yarn about how people work and give of their time to do remarkable things together, a morality play of sacrificing something of ourselves for someone else to grow, a memorial when one of us was suffering and we came together to ease their journey. If only we will but make the effort to consistently do the work that is more than what is on our daily task list, one interaction at a time.

What gets in the way of taking the time to ensure our interactions propel us all forward? We live in a work environment where busy seems to be a gold standard. It gets interpreted as I must be doing something valuable, whether it's strategic or not. Busy means there is something measurable I'm immediately going to be able to show my supervisor or the board. However, what we've learned is busy is the destroyer of creativity, and the latest studies show it can create

permanent damage. In *Deep Work*, Cal Newport says, "Spend enough time in a state of frenetic shallowness and you permanently reduce your capacity to perform deep work." Leaders, can alter this and be the buffers of reasonableness, allowing us to flourish as humans and to make the biggest contributions to society, while enhancing our relationships and experiences. Leaders can help us have time for each other, so we can have meaningful interactions that lead to extraordinary work - not just work.

What if in creating that space, we also invested in people, taking the time to learn how they want to develop, giving them latitude to create and design, and became the champion of their full being? What if we assumed the best and coached, inquired instead of accused, asked instead of leading with our assumptions, were truly open to allowing something different to occur, and operated from compassion? Our interactions can be models for others to follow as they lead their teams.

As we've moved out of crisis leadership, we have realized that we cannot run at this pace in perpetuity. There is a reshaping needed, as we formulate our strategic futures for digital first organizations and create an emotionally intelligent work environment. In the midst of this experience, we seem to have lost the understanding of the difference between healthy debate and conflict. Conflict begins with emotion. It starts with me, wanting to get my point across, rarely positions an intellectual argument first, and seeks to win, instead of seeking to understand, collaborate, or negotiate. Conflict overwhelms the room with words, behaviors, and tensions, and blocks the exchange of ideas – intentionally.

Debate starts with a well-crafted position, homework, and a grounding in facts; a thoughtful presentation, a respectful tone, and a willingness to put forth thoughts for pondering, discussion, or examination; while remaining open to learning, listening, and co-creating – a win for all. It reminds me of the times I entered a board meeting certain of how board members would approach a topic, and pretty sure where my own position lay, only to be amazed at how a thorough and respectful exploration resulted in an even more compelling decision than where we began, and how my own position was comfortably altered in the process... one contribution at a time; one interaction at a time.

This points to one of our key challenges today - that we have not undertaken the leadership development work to be adept at how we invite, facilitate, discuss, de-escalate, and lead through difficult discourses; how we accept that every issue doesn't have to have a winner and a loser; grasp we can engage well with respect when opinions, experiences, and values may not align. We almost seem to have lost the desire to listen from interest, curiosity, and to learn – instead of listening for points to counter or end dialogue just to get to a decision and move on. If we can learn not to personalize our discussions, we can have a shot at understanding differences and live well together, while allowing each other to co-exist.

What if we defined not just our culture with words – all the good ones like trust, respect, collaboration, etc., and also asked ourselves, when we are living these, what behaviors will we see? As importantly, what behaviors do we not want to see? Doing this work – taking the time to do this work – defining what it means to lead from the light, from possibility, from building up, and from creating trust – is some of the most beneficial work and best spent time that we'll ever participate in.

Ultimately, we're talking about living from civility – one interaction at a time. Who has a better shot at this being an expansive approach for society than associations – with the millions of people we engage with year over year? We have an amazing opportunity to demonstrate how to design effective conversations, to model behaviors that allow our missions to flourish – and as we do the work, to show others how best-in-class interactions win the day. We can, not only engage in deep exploration of important topics, but invite the differences, create scenarios of how we engage when it gets tough, show the world we can debate and get to resolution in healthy ways.

What if we also went beyond a culture of words and rewarded the behaviors that we want to see, built them into Board Orientations, had board discussions not just about what we've accomplished

but how we've accomplished it? What if it was part of our hiring interviews, our volunteer training, our conversations about Board candidates? It's not just about skill and diversity, but how skilled people are in being the ways that we want leaders to be in our organizations and companies. What if we talked to board candidates and were clear, that in leadership roles, how we be is just as important as the work we do? What if it was also a regular part of our performance check-ins and annual reviews?

It seems a welcome thought to have a break from how things have been evolving in what we see in society and how those interactions are playing out. If we can take a breath, have the courage to redesign, and contribute individually and every day to associations' broad impact on humanity, we could become an incredible crescendo of positivity, empathy, compassion, and accomplishment – because of each of us. I'm a believer – one person at a time, one interaction at a time.

About the Author: Cynthia Mills founded The Leaders' Haven to help leaders & teams go beyond business as usual & continuously transform, so they can fulfill their true calling & exceed the expectations of the people they serve.™ The consultancy partners with clients to align for impact & leverage results through strategy, governance, and leadership coaching. Nicknamed by clients "The Board Whisperer™," "Chief Experience Weaver™," and the "Lamaze Coach for Boards," Cynthia relishes transformational journeys and loves that moment when everyone sees their potential and commits! Connect at cynthiamills@theleadershaven.com and learn more at www.theleadershaven.com.

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