



# How to get the “Story Learner’s” edge

*This is the fifth in a series of six articles in the new Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront.*



I’VE NEVER MET ANYONE who said they left a company because they were recognized too much, and, I would guess, neither have you. We crave for others to notice our work, appreciate our accomplishments and recognize our contributions. Leaders make a practice of doing just that.

The most impressive leaders—the Extreme Leaders—go way beyond recognizing and rewarding others. What they have, in fact, is a boundless fascination with and gratitude for the people around them, colleagues and customers alike. They notice others’ accomplishments, to be sure, but they also learn their stories,

understand their challenges, and absorb their hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Why? Because they love the human drama (and comedy) and are driven by a desire to help, to make a difference, and to hold on to the very things that make us human. Extreme Leaders are awake, attentive, and observant to and about the lives of others while they simultaneously strive to make the business more productive and profitable. And, most important, they understand that a fulfilling life and a thriving business are not mutually exclusive ideas.

Consider Dick, a mid-level vice president at a formidable national bank. He ran the check processing operation in the bank’s corporate facility. It was the closest thing a bank has to a manufacturing operation and it had an ethnically diverse, primarily blue-collar employee base. Dick beamed with pride and enthusiasm whenever he would tell story after story of unprecedented productivity increases and skyrocketing employee morale.

Dick rarely used the pronoun, “I,” as in, “I’ve done this; I’ve accomplished that.” He also rarely used the word “we.” Instead, he told story after story about individual people and how they’d risen to conquer one enormous challenge after another. And he told many of those stories with the hero standing right there. Some appeared embarrassed by the spotlight, but every one of them,

without exception, expressed some variation of a glowing “thank you” before scurrying back to work.

It’s not as though Dick didn’t have an ego. He could puff out his chest along with the best of them. But he always brought it back to one central theme: his deep gratitude for his employees’ spunk, imagination, personalities and drive.

Simply put, Dick loved the individuals on his team—even the ones he eventually had to let go.

Several years later, after his promotion to Sr. Vice President (which was essentially deity status at the bank) surviving a merger and moving to another division, Dick was charged with conducting what some euphemistically call a “reduction in force.” Over a 12-month period, he culled his division from 1500 people down to 175, mostly through outsourcing. During that same period, however, employee satisfaction percentages went from the mid 70’s to the high 80’s, raising steadily all throughout the process. That was, to put it mildly, counter-intuitive. And it wasn’t because the survivors were happy to still have a job (which they were), but anyone who’s ever been through a lay-off will tell you that the

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event is usually characterized by increased stress, cynicism and even paranoia. That was not the case in Dick's domain.

When asked him how he accounted for the amazing spirit and morale even as people were jetting out the door, he said, "Two things: I kept everyone involved, and I continued to let them know I cared every freakin' day."

And that's really the whole point: he knew their stories because he cared about them, and they knew he cared because he knew their stories; consequently, even through the most difficult of times, his team put their full effort into everything they did.

Can you say the same about your team?

The good news is that Dick's "story-learner" ability wasn't genetically encoded in his DNA. He learned how to do it by making a practice of fascination and gratitude and so can you by following these steps:

1. Write down the names of one or two key people internal to your business (colleagues, employees, staff, managers, partners, associates, etc.) and one or two key external people (customers, vendors, suppliers, etc.)

2. List everything you know about each person beyond the "function" he or she serves. Assess how much you know or don't know about each as a human being.

3. Ask each person to tell you one important story or event from his or her life. Or look for an opportunity to find out more during your next conversation. Ask each to share with you his or her number one business challenge.

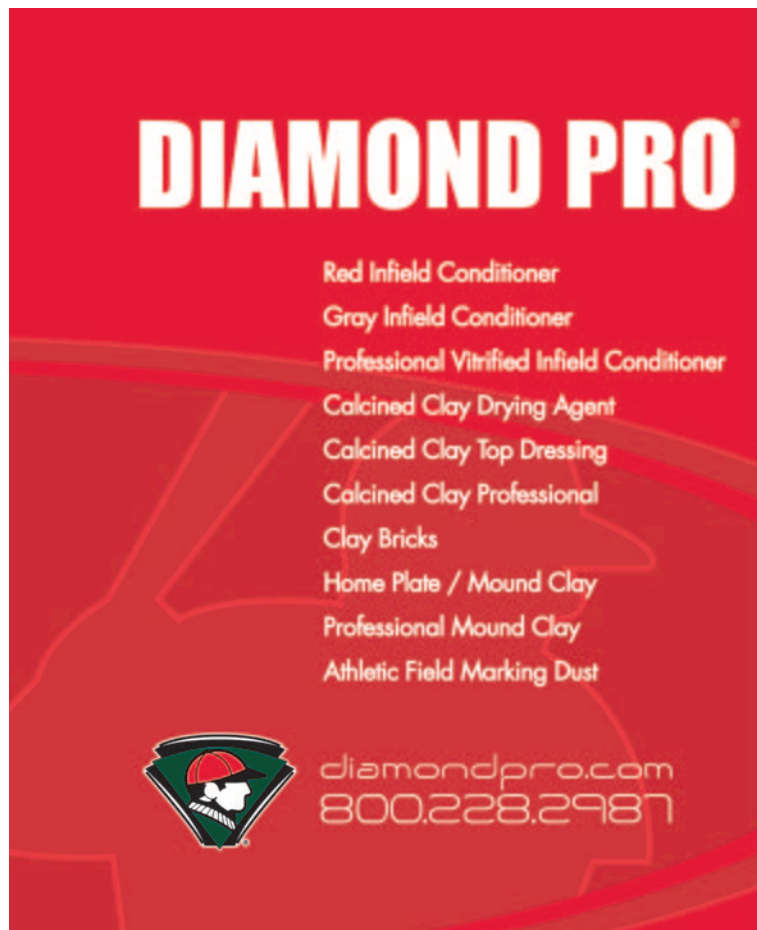
4. Ask if there's some way you can be of service; something you can do to help with each person's challenge. Even if that person declines your offer, he or she will always appreciate your asking.

5. Pick one or two more people and do it again.

6. Repeat until you run out of people—for the rest of your life, in other words.


For some, this practice may be awkward, even difficult at first. Like anything else, however, being a "story learner" becomes easier with practice. And the payoff you'll receive in your employees' morale, engagement and productivity will be well worth the price of any initial discomfort you may have to invest. ■

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