

A Man For Our Times

by Caroline Evans

Recently, I listened to a business-oriented webinar, which started with a personal question to each of the panellists – what would be their overriding memory of the Covid-19 crisis?

This stuck with me for two reasons:

Covid-19 has literally ‘brought home’ to all of us the close interaction of our business and personal lives. At first it was a little disconcerting – though for me very much a positive – to see the media and business leaders in their domestic context. Since then I’ve noticed an increasing boldness in business-oriented webinar discussions and most recently there has been an increase in the willingness to offer personal insights to the debate.

I have sensed that individuals on panels have appeared more immediately receptive and empathetic to other views. This was, perhaps, as a result of all of us becoming acutely aware that no one was an expert nor had the answers to so much of what still lay ahead.

Also, the personal nature of the question posed in this webinar, struck a chord with me because – along with one of the panellists – I too had lost someone close. My experience was not as intense or as difficult as the panellist’s. But, in hearing his story, I was able to feel both the emotional support of a shared experience and also, selfishly, relief that the death of my beloved Godfather, David, was not as awful to bear as the death of the panellist’s mother.

So, what are we learning from this new norm? That, in this time of limited physical contact, the public sharing of personal stories in a business environment has become more important and more acceptable than ever before!

Rather than the result of infection, David’s death was I’m sure precipitated by a lack of close human interaction. He died at the grand old age of 91, and not of Covid-19 directly. However, the physical and emotional barriers made necessary by Covid-19 were too much for him to endure. David had enjoyed a very successful and long, well-lived life – throughout which he had always thrived on a curiosity about, and conversation with other people at every opportunity. At the supermarket checkout, in the taxi, at church, around the board table, across the Livery halls, theatres and concert venues – anywhere. Unfortunately, when he needed it most, lockdown deprived him of these pleasures, leaving him not just alone but feeling lonely.

Is the increasing overtness of personal disclosure and empathy a consequence of social distancing? Will it sustain in both social and corporate environments? Which of our major corporations will take the lead on spearheading initiatives on human kindness and understanding? Who will be at the forefront of aligning their policies to publicly enhance the lives of their employees? What should we expect in terms of innovative compassionate

ideas and 'people first' projects? Where will boards focus their attention in this future landscape and on whom?

David thrived on being with younger generations and people of all diversities, and was generous in his support of them. I was one of so many that benefited from his memorable acts of kindness. He firmly believed in teaching and building confidence in others for the better good. He always treated me as an equal and introduced me to people and places I would otherwise not have encountered. As a result, he boosted my confidence and provided me with the wherewithal to achieve so much more than I would otherwise have aimed for, and for that I will always be grateful.

To all corporations, organisations and companies new, large or small, let this be a lesson. Be like David: encourage, nurture and engage with the young and young at heart, and those who are different. Make it a priority to be curious of and empathetic to personal individuality – now and in the future.

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