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CONFIDENCE: Putting Grace In Your Swagger

By John Baldoni

“We want our guys to get their swagger back,” was a comment I first heard years ago while working with a sales organization that was trying to regain its traditional number-one role within its industry. Through hard work, discipline, and some inspired leadership, the sales people did reach their goal. Swagger soon followed, and as I recall, the team used it well – with class and dignity, a healthy dose of confidence without over-confidence. They acted the way a legendary football coach once counseled his star running back to behave when scoring a touchdown: “Act like you’ve been there before!” No dance. No high five. Just hand the ball to the ref. It’s a lesson that all the great NFL running backs from Jim Brown and Gale Sayers to Tony Dorsett, Emmitt Smith, and Barry Sanders followed. That’s the true essence of swagger – conducting your business with confidence but not over-doing it.

Swagger is, for me, is the subtle display of confidence and capability. Swagger is the proud reflection of your ability to get things done correctly, be it sinking a three-point shot at the buzzer or reducing defects to near-undetectable rates. Those with swagger know what they are doing, and it shows. When displayed appropriately, swagger can help a team or an entire organization feel better about itself and its people, and in turn deliver more to its customers. Here are some ways to develop it.

- *Know yourself.* Before you can achieve anything, you must know yourself and your capabilities – and fill in those that are missing. A good manager, for example, will surround himself or herself with people of complementary skills, those who can do what the manager cannot, be it to manage details, think creatively, or balance a budget.
- *Know your team.* Think about what your team can and cannot do. It makes no sense to give a team a challenge that is impossible; that only leads to discouragement and disaffection. Like a mountain guide equipping those in the group with the proper equipment – ropes, crampons, and tents – the manager must also provide employees with enough time as well as the tools and resources to accomplish the job. Just as no mountain guide would fail to provide the climbing clients with oxygen tanks for high altitude climbing, no boss should deprive the team of enough start-up capital or personnel to do the job well.

- *Share the glory.* Swagger really is a team product, and it requires some spreading around. If one person gets all the credit, while he or she may feel pretty “swaggerish,” others will feel “un-swaggered,” and thus more disengaged and less willing to pull one’s weight. So celebrate the wins, and make certain that everyone feels a part of the effort. It doesn’t take much to share the glory, just a willingness to do the sharing.
- *Know your limits.* Can you ever have too much swagger? Absolutely, and that can lead to big trouble. U.S. Marine Lieut. General Gregory Newbold recently asserted in an essay in *Time* magazine that the planning for the invasion of Iraq “was done with casualness and swagger that are the special province of those who have never had to execute these missions – or bury the results.” Newbold was taking direct aim at the civilian planners, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who ignored advice that didn’t fit their worldview. That’s the danger of too much swagger – inflated pride and the resulting hubris. Thousands have died in Iraq as a result. Newbold does not spare himself, calling his own failure to “challenge those who were determined to invade a country whose actions were peripheral to the real threat – Al-Qaeda.” The job of the leader, said Newbold, “is to give voice to those who can’t – or don’t have the opportunity to – speak.” Swagger can dull a leader’s strategic thinking or obscure an obligation to the people for whom he or she is responsible.

When used moderately, however, swagger can be a source of energy and motivation.

Just like the New York Yankee ball clubs of yore, swagger can also be used to intimidate the competition. Yet too much swagger can degenerate into what athletes call “showboating.” No one likes a show-off – not customers, not bosses, not teammates. Let the inner glow tell the tale.

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