

Inspiring Discretionary Effort: Planting Seeds of Servant Leadership

By Ann McGee-Cooper

Almost 30 years ago in my first meeting with Bob Gary, then Executive Vice President of Generation and Mining for TXU, I noticed a quote on his desk. It was 29 words that changed my life:

"It's what you do now when you don't have to do anything that makes you what you want to be when it's too late to do anything about it."

I thought a lot about that quote, and I began to focus a good bit of my time investing effort toward future opportunities.



Gardening has been one of my passions for many years and I realize that I find my spiritual connection with a Higher Power during the hours I enjoy gardening in silence. Birds, squirrels, tiny chameleons, butterflies, red and blue dragon flies and other creatures delight me with their presence. It is a time of deep renewal and meditation as I become one with the soil and thrive on the joy of creating beauty that is ever changing.

10 days ago I was gardening and noticed tall stems popping up on the top of the berm. Clearly they were lilies about to bloom. As I worked in other parts of my garden I, noticed four other patches of stems popping up. A few days later, the stems were crowned with red spider lilies. I was delighted and surprised as I vaguely remembered planting these bulbs but had long since forgotten about them. Each day I got fresh energy walking through the garden and admiring the burst of color they brought. The added benefit is that they are perennials and will come back each year with more and more blooms. This inspired me to plant even more bulbs as I noticed the energy and delight I and all the

neighbors experienced from this surprising burst of color!

I see the metaphor of my gardening as a manifestation of what Bob was encouraging. When one visions a bright future and invests extra effort now planting for tomorrow, life becomes transformed. This is also a great metaphor for servant leadership. As a person grows from only investing in personal gain and discovers the joy of helping those around them grow, succeed, and benefit, there is a double or triple win! Work that formerly was tiring now becomes exhilarating thanks to a new focus on giving to others and creating something much greater together than any one person could possibly create alone.

Mike Blevins, former Chief Nuclear Officer at a nuclear power plant and now one of our Adjunct Partners, pointed out that one of the key differences in leading by bossing versus leading by serving and growing others is the significant discretionary effort that those being served begin to invest back into the shared goals of the team. A leader can't "make" others perform this quality of inspired effort that is generated by a servant-leader. When someone begins to listen to our ideas, encourage, appreciate and inspire our greatness, work becomes gratifying, inspiring and fun.

So I thank my friend and mentor, Bob Gary, for opening a door to a transforming way to think about leadership. Servant-leaders don't have to wait for someone to give them

the title of leader. They become leaders because those around them are drawn to their unselfish spirit of collaboration. They keep a glad heart and stay calm under pressure. They see the best in others and turn problems into opportunities. Who wouldn't be drawn to such a person and be energized by their role model.

My garden is my teacher whispering in my ear, helping me learn that I can't rush out to save neglected plants by drowning them in water once they have withered and died from the dry heat. Neither can I grow a great team without investing a generous amount of nurturing, listening, visioning together and encouragement well ahead of big challenges. It truly is the discretionary "volunteer" effort from each of us that transforms a job into a rewarding purpose and elevates a good team to a great team.

