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Dr. Shugart, known for being an inspirational leader, shares an excerpt from his essay, “On Doing Good,” which will be published in the forthcoming book, “The Crucible of Work: Reflections on the Inner Lives of Leaders.” Read on as he shares his thoughts on a leader’s responsibility to foster a work environment where people not only do well, but also do good.



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To the question, “how well am I doing?” the stuff of performance review, we should always add, “what good am I doing?” the stuff of a life that nourishes the soul.

I discovered the hard way that there is a special responsibility for leaders here. Quite a few years ago, in my first college presidency, I and my senior colleagues were having just these kinds of discussions and feeling we were beginning to make headway in our organization, a public college of about 20,000 students. One day a student—we’ll call her Jenny—came to see me. She was a college ambassador, selected for a role representing the college with me in the community, for which she received a modest scholarship and the standard khaki trousers and blue blazer

ambassador uniform, and so I was acquainted with this thoughtful student. Jenny was, on this occasion, clearly upset, so I brought her into my office and encouraged her to open up. She told me her boyfriend, with whom I was also acquainted, had been killed two weeks before in an automobile accident. We had a cry, and I offered to do anything I could. She said there was one thing I could do. She had tried coming back to school (this tragedy had occurred mid-semester), but just couldn’t complete the term, so she was withdrawing. Further, her finances were very tenuous, so she asked me to arrange a full refund of her tuition. Now, in that particular state, this was actually illegal, the cut-off date for refunds established in the appropriations act by the

state legislature. Nevertheless, I promised her a refund and offered to take her textbooks back at full value. Jenny and I talked a while further and she left.

During my lunch hour, I was on a long training run with another staff member, several miles from campus, telling him this story. He was not thrilled with it – he was the Chief Financial Officer, a wonderful and caring human being. His concern, I assumed, was the potential of an audit finding, something CFO’s hate. I told him not to concern himself, that this was one audit exception I’d be happy to take. (I could just see the headlines: “President Breaks Rules to Help Devastated Student.”) “Okay,” he said, “but how is this going to make the other staff

she talked to feel?" I was stopped dead in my tracks. Of course, I wasn't the first person she had brought this concern to. So we ran back to campus and dressed. I went to see the Dean of Students. Had she heard from Jenny? Yes, she had. Isn't it awful? She told her there was nothing she could do, but she could come see me if she wanted. Then I went to see the Director of Admissions, whom I knew to be a friend of Jenny's. Had Jenny come to him? Yes. Isn't it awful? He told her there was nothing he could do, but she could go see the Dean if she wanted. So I stopped asking.

I want to emphasize that both the Dean and Director were and are wonderful people, kind and responsive, always willing to go the extra mile for anyone, and especially for a student in need. Both of them wanted to help her, but it required breaking a rule, creating some risk for the organization and perhaps themselves. They wanted to do good, but didn't feel the organization could afford it.

I went back to my office and put my head down on the cool glass top thinking that I had accomplished nothing in two years of leadership. It was my job as the leader to create an environment in my organization where good people could do the right thing for the right reasons fearlessly. And I hadn't. And there were two kinds of prices being paid for that failure. People like Jenny who needed our organization to do something good, something special and out of the ordinary, something involving a little bit of risk, were not being served. We were not "doing all the good you can to all the people you can." In addition, people like these two staff members were being damaged. What price does one pay when he knows there is some good to be done, wants to do the good, and doesn't for no better reason than it might break some rule? We put people in this position all the time. I recall telling this story to a large

group of counselors in California who work with students with disabilities every day, coordinating services to support them in their education. Except that the perennial resource limits more often put these people, who entered the work out of a calling to serve, in the position of rationing the services. When I made this point in a rhetorical question, "what price must you be paying in your hearts when this happens?" sobbing could be heard from all over the auditorium.

If we believe in "doing all the good you can," as a part of our spiritual and psychological health, then we leaders have to create the environment, the organizational culture that permits it, even when it means

breaking the rules. We may have to learn how to break the rules intelligently. We may even have to pay some consequences for someone else's rule-breaking when it was the right thing to do. And this behavior has to be a daily habit, not just a special case.

If doing good and enabling others to do good is vital in our daily jobs, it is all the more important in our thinking about the whole enterprise we are attempting to lead. It is inherent in the experience of the crucible of work that the greater the heat and pressure, the more narrow the focus of our attention often becomes. Under pressure to survive and produce, our hierarchy of attention is often forced straight to the "bottom line," the tangible and proximate outcomes of our work. We generally don't fail to consider the good we might accomplish together in the world because we couldn't care less, but because

the press of daily demands on us squeezes out the habit of reflection, both as individuals and as communities of work. As the poet Rainier Maria Rilke wrote,

"For somewhere there is an ancient enmity between our daily life and the great work. Help me in saying it to understand it. Requiem for a Friend."

The source for a deep sense of transcendent purpose in our organizations, the mission beyond the mission, isn't the difference we want to make in the organization, or the difference we want to make in the industry, but the difference we want to make in the world. Rarely is this question asked in any serious way in our

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organizational life. As I sit on various boards of directors, I can imagine the resistance to questions of transcendent purpose as useless distractions and pontificating. But I am certain that these are among the questions that separate great organizations from the mediocre, giving their leadership broader and more meaningful insight in to the present and future of the enterprise and calling themselves and their employees to a different sense of pride and commitment to the work. ✖

To read the essay in its entirety, please visit valenciacc.edu/alumni.