

WHAT'S IMPORTANT | Vol. V, Issue 4 | Aug. 26, 2009

"What's Important" is a universal concern. The phrase resonates with an infinite number of meanings. What's important is both a question and an answer, depending on the situation.

Leaders often find mentoring to be an unwritten part of their job description. From taking the young, recently promoted sales director under their wing, to helping a newly hired CFO navigate the corporate culture, or grooming an executive assistant for a first project management opportunity, caring leaders make a difference for those they mentor. But, are all efforts to help actually helpful?

Returning from a morning walk, Tom spotted a cocoon in his yard. He kept a close watch on it, eager to see the butterfly transforming on the inside. One day he watched as the butterfly struggled to force its body through a small hole in the cocoon. Then, the butterfly seemed to stop making progress. It appeared to be stuck. Anxious to help, Tom carefully cut open the cocoon. The butterfly emerged easily, but with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It was never able to fly.

Despite his best intentions, Tom didn't realize that the butterfly's struggle to squeeze through the small opening of the cocoon is nature's way of forcing fluid from the body into the butterfly's wings. That struggle is necessary to empower flight.

Challenges are important training grounds in business and in life. In our eagerness to help a new recruit, a colleague, a friend, or even a child out of a tight squeeze, we can deny them the opportunity to spread their own wings. Whether learning to read Dick and Jane or a spread sheet, we all struggle at first. This isn't to say we should sit idly by in times of danger or deny assistance when it's requested. But, sometimes we do need to resist the natural tendency to immediately make things easy for others.

Understanding why we are so eager to jump in and take matters into our own hands can be useful. Is it impatience? (This is taking too long.) Is it ego? (She'll never do it as well as I can.) Is it our own discomfort? (I just can't stand to watch him have a hard time with this.) We may be surprised that our insistence to help can actually send a disempowering message and foster dependency.

Struggles can make us stronger. Yes, we can learn by watching, but we learn more by doing, and doing can be messy, frustrating and hard. But, facing challenges and

determining how we react to them allows our wings to grow and our individual style to take flight. And, as leaders, that's what we want to encourage in those we mentor.

What's important when taking someone under our wing is that we are careful not to inadvertently clip theirs.

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