

Honor your heroes

PAY FORWARD TO OTHERS THE GIFT THAT WAS GIVEN TO YOU

“You probably don’t remember me,” read the opening line of a letter I received one morning.

When I glanced at the name typed below the signature, I was transported back 18 years to my first significant role as a leader.

Kate was a software developer who was brilliantly talented but struggling to work as part of our team. Because of her strong personality and fierce determination, she had damaged many relationships and created a reputation that she was only interested in her own success.

Kate and I began to meet twice each week, discussing behaviors that would help her to build trust with the people on her team and practicing different ways of responding to situations. She worked hard, and over time, she rebuilt the trust of her teammates so strongly that she was promoted to a leadership role — a recognition that her team enthusiastically endorsed.

Now, 18 years later, she had written a heartfelt letter to express what my coaching and my care for her as a person had meant to her life. She described the things she had learned in our sessions and how they had become essential to her career but also how they had helped her as a spouse, a mother and a friend.

The impact of Kate’s letter was overwhelming and brought me to tears. It not only gave me a sense of deep satisfaction, but it also rekindled my purpose as a leader. Today, that letter is one of my most treasured mementos.

Honor your heroes by expressing your gratitude

Do you remember your heroes? Stop and think about the teachers, mentors, leaders and friends who helped shape the person you are today. Remember those who patiently taught you the skills that made you successful, who offered advice and help when you were struggling, and who encouraged you in a time of need. Now ask yourself a single question: Do they know how much they meant to you?

Most likely, they don’t. And they never will unless you tell them.

Kate’s letter inspired me to begin writing to my own heroes — creating for them the same experience she gave me. Over the years, I’ve written to former teachers and old friends and even to authors like Stephen Covey, whose work was pivotal in my life. In the process, I made an unexpected discovery: writing a letter of appreciation is equally as joyous as receiving one.

I challenge you to have this same experience by writing to one of your heroes this week. When you do, you will know the impact that expressing your gratitude can have, both on your heroes and on you.

Honor your heroes by modeling their lessons

As I wrote to each of my heroes, I was reminded not only of the principles they taught me but also the example they set in living them out. For some, I knew that I was

still practicing what I had learned, but for others, I realized that I had forgotten their valuable teaching. Writing each letter gave me a renewed sense of accountability to make sure their lessons were not lost.

As you write your own letters, keep a list of the principles and characteristics you’ve learned and use it to hold yourself accountable. Remember that the greatest tribute to your heroes will always be through the life you lead.

Honor your heroes by becoming a hero

If you could ask them, each of your heroes would want only one thing in return for all they gave you: that you give the same gift of time, attention and genuine caring to someone else.

Look closely and you will see countless people who need what you have to offer: young people in need of mentoring and encouragement, former co-workers who now need help finding a job, overstressed managers whose personal lives are near the breaking point, and senior workers struggling to learn new skills.

It’s not easy to make time to help someone, but it’s important. And it’s the debt of honor you owe to your heroes.

One day you will look back on your life and be unable to remember all the urgent tasks you now face. But you will never forget the people you’ve helped. And they will never forget you. <<

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