



Leadership Matters



Forgiveness Leads to Innovation

By Donna Zajonc, PCC

August 2010

If you work in an environment that is unforgiving, you may find that innovation is close to impossible. Human beings have a natural urge to create, which comes from risk-taking and trying something new, bigger or different. **An unforgiving organizational culture condemns risk-taking because mistakes are not tolerated. No risk-taking----no innovation----it is that simple.**

Unwanted things happen on all scales, on a range from professional mistakes to personal tragedies. How we proceed and step forward in light of these moments, defines who we are personally and professionally. A key to progress and innovation in leadership and life is the mastery of forgiveness.

I will come back to this key component to leadership in a moment. First, I want to share with you the story of Rae Cheney and her tale of forgiveness, which has led to a pioneering program half way across the globe.

Today is Rae Cheney's 90th birthday. Rae lives a mile or two down the street from me and quite possibly looks and acts younger today than she did ten years ago. Why? **Rae's forgiveness has fueled her positive outlook and has given her energy to work for an innovative program that saves lives everyday.**

Her only son, Daniel died in Vietnam on January 6, 1969 when his US Army helicopter was shot down while successfully saving the life of another downed pilot. On that same January day, an engagement photo was printed in the Bellingham, WA newspaper. Rae frequently says that she celebrated Dan's engagement announcement and grieved at his graveside in the same month.

The ravages of war and her son's death broke Rae's heart. She searched for ways to heal. At the same time, her daughter Jerilyn, Dan's sister, knew she must reach out to the Vietnamese people when diplomatic relations were restored between our countries. In an effort to build trust and understanding, Jerilyn generated the vision to work alongside the Vietnamese people to reverse the consequences of war. That was a mighty big risk.

Jerilyn learned that this area, the Quang Tri Province, was the most severely bombed battle ground in the history of the world. That year, PeaceTrees Vietnam was founded to help remove landmines and unexploded ordnance and trees were planted by international volunteers on the safely cleared land. Over the last thirty years, almost 11,000 people have been killed or maimed by landmines or unexploded ordnance. One in five of the victims are children.

Throughout the years, Rae wasn't sure she was ready to go to Vietnam or fully engage in her daughter's program. Rae began her road to forgiveness with simple gestures of support for her daughter and the new PeaceTrees Vietnam program by writing personal thank you letters to every donor. She has now written more than 7,500 personal letters to thank each donor for supporting the work of PeaceTrees Vietnam.

For the past 15 years, Rae has transformed her sorrow to service. Volunteering full time with PeaceTrees Vietnam in many capacities (she now serves on the board of directors), Rae has began speaking to veterans groups about her story and the role of forgiveness. Last year, Rae was invited to speak to the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July.

On Sept. 5th, at the age of 90, Rae will travel to Quang Tri Province, Vietnam, to dedicate the Mothers' Peace Library, built in honor of all mothers who lost their sons and daughters in wartime. She will also dedicate the Dan Cheney Kindergarten, built in honor of her son.

As I stood in the circle of friends and family yesterday, to celebrate Rae's birthday, I felt the creative energies of this extraordinary woman. Embarking on a journey half way away the world just days after her 90th birthday, I saw how forgiveness has nurtured Rae's capacity to innovate.

Cleansing the heart of blame or condemnation allows human ingenuity to thrive.

By transcending their sorrow into forgiveness, Rae and Jerilyn are able to put their creative energies to work on behalf of thousands of mothers, families and children. Thank you Rae and Jerilyn for your inspiration and happy birthday Rae!

Let's circle back to the role of forgiveness and innovation in leadership. **There is a fine line between forgiving mistakes and tolerating poor performance and repeated mistakes.** Here are a few symptoms of an unhealthy culture that focuses on mistakes and will definitely suppress innovation:

- What stories are told? When a mistake happens on your team or in your organization, do you or others retell the mistake over and over?
- Do you willingly collude with others to look for blame?
- If a mistake was made, do you or others in the organization look for ways to get revenge?
- When mistakes are made, do leaders look the other way and not tell the truth about the mistake?

Here are a few qualities to look for in a forgiving and innovating culture:

- There is acceptance (and therefore an attitude of forgiveness) of legitimate reasons why the mistake was made.
- Stories are told about how the individual or organization learned from the previous mistake, changes were made and the mistake sparked growth and new awareness.
- Mistakes are recognized, apologies are made and accepted. The mistakes are not swept under the rug and never talked about. Instead they are evaluated and continuous improvement remains the focus.
- Others own-up to their role in the mistake.

When I coach leaders, I have discovered that forgiveness is possibly the most difficult quality for a leader to embrace. Forgiving themselves is often more difficult than forgiving others. This takes a destructive emotional toll personally and over time reduces a leader's capacity to take risks and innovate.

If Rae and Jerilyn can transcend through forgiveness and use that energy to create an innovative and life-giving program half way around the world; you can also learn to use forgiveness in your leadership while creating an empowered professional environment. Your newly freed-up energy will inspire a plethora of innovative and empowered ideas!

Contact Donna at: www.bainbridgeleadership.com donna@bainbridgeleadership.com
206.780.9300