

Getting on the Same Page: Finding the Ties that Bind

It is 10 pm on a week night, and just as I head upstairs with my novel and cup of tea in hand, relishing the peace and quiet of the end of day, my 16 year old daughter asks, “Mom, you feel like playing me a game of backgammon?” The truth is that I probably don’t, but I know that as we sit down to play, we will have fun and connect in the way we always do. We have our pattern. I promise not to beat her too badly. She rolls her eyes and asks me when was the last time I beat her? I claim an aging mind that can’t track those details, and then the game begins. Ten minutes later, she has probably won again and then we play the revenge match.

There are few things I let come between my book and late night cup of tea, but backgammon with my daughter is one of them. As we roll the dice, we are discussing the day, the swim meet, thoughts about college, the Red Sox lineup, a funny story, an irritating homework assignment – you name it. It is a ritual that yields some of the most natural and honest conversation we have. No work is involved. It just happens.

The ties that bind...It occurs to me that in some instinctive way, I have found all kinds of ritual that ensures I will stay connected with people I am close to, no matter life’s pace. My day almost always starts with a call to my Mom, who is two thousand miles away, and serves as my emotional anchor (so what if I am 48 years old?). Besides being the central command post with the latest updates on family, my Mom usually provides me one good laugh and one vote of confidence as I tell her what lies ahead for the day. “I know you, Jill, and you are up to the task,” my Mom will say. Somehow, that is just the music I need to begin my “beat the clock” routine where I go from client, to tennis, to home office, to kid pick-up.

I have other ties that bind. On most Saturdays, I take a long walk with two close friends where we update each other on the week’s major headlines. Topics range from the moods of our kids and spouses, to the vicissitudes of work, to books, recipes, hobbies, and more. It is all fair game and uncensored.

Even my work has its rituals. Every other week, I meet with a client at the local Starbucks at 8:15 sharp. She has an unusually challenging job, but on that morning we are able to sift through the obstacles, find some humor usually relating to peculiar organizational behavior, and brainstorm a plan. The guard is down, and we can talk with candor in a way that formal office settings discourage. The first time we met, I told her that “Your job is like a garden that needs tending to.” Once the weeds were pulled, and new bulbs were planted, a beautiful site would emerge. Well, every other week I begin our chat, with “How is the garden?” This question always elicits a wry chuckle, like “Who are you kidding?”

Somehow, unconsciously I have built in a series of rituals in my life aimed at staying connected. I am not sure why it works but I have my theories:

- *Almost no planning is involved:* The ritual is built into the rhythm of my life. Backgammon in late evening, Sabbath dinner with my family, a Saturday walk with my friends...it all just happens as if pre-programmed.
- *The rituals are comfortable and inherently good:* The rituals to which I refer are healthy and worth repeating. Because we have “grooved” our behavior and can repeat it without thinking, the experience is soothing. This is especially valuable considering how we often have to stretch ourselves in uncomfortable settings in the name of growth.
- *The rituals provide shared history:* In each case, I have an emotional journal of experiences that took place between me and my world. It is like a bank account where I draw memories and warmth. Repeating the ritual adds to the bank account.

I suspect that our technology-enabled lives, where speed and efficiency rule, have caused us to lose sight of the value of ritual. Two experiences in my corporate career – one early on and one much later – highlight the need. In the late 80’s and 90’s, I worked at Hewlett Packard. On my first Friday on the job, I became acquainted with

the “Dunkin Donuts coffee talk.” Each Friday, HP provided free donuts and coffee while we gathered in a large conference room and heard an informal talk on a business issue and then chatted afterwards with colleagues. This experience was repeated throughout HP corridors and not only provided a valuable exchange of information, but established camaraderie. We got to know each other. The benefits of this ritual were numerous: it built morale, reinforced team play across departments, and provided fun in the work place. For good reasons, HP was identified as one of the best run companies in America.

Now wind the clock forward 10 years and I am at a mid-size company which has at best a slim business strategy. People know very little about each other’s work and the office doors are almost always closed. Eventually, when I am more comfortable in my job, I tell the founder that we need a more defined strategy and better communication. After some resistance about the cost and time involved, he agrees to let me work with the management team to spearhead a process that will yield a well-understood strategy. One year later, the strategy is fully-baked, and the coffee talks are starting to occasionally happen. The trend is in the right direction as they begin to find their ties that bind.

Whether at work, at home, or at play, we can all benefit from finding the ties that bind. What are yours?