



Be Loyal to Those Absent by Stephen R. Covey

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Being loyal to those who are absent and assuming good faith of others are keys to building trust in a culture. The ultimate test of principle-centered leadership is to be loyal to people who are absent when their names come up in conversations and meetings. When other people are not with you, they're in the dark they don't know what's happening, what you're saying about them, and whether you are loyal to them. And that's when you show your true character. That doesn't mean you're not critical. You could be critical. But you're constructively critical and loyal to the point that you would not be ashamed if they happened to overhear the conversation, or if word got back to them, as it often does. You don't just sit on the sideline cutting, labeling, and stereotyping people and then look for evidence to support it.

Four Short Stories

Perhaps a few stories will help make this point.

Story 1. Once I was a faculty member at a university in Hawaii. I was very upset about our housing situation, and so I went directly to the president, since he worked with me on my visiting professorship. In the meeting, I complained about his housing director, who seemed to me to be incompetent and uncaring. The president immediately said to me, "Stephen, I'm sorry to hear about your housing situation, but I want you to know that our housing director is a very fine and competent person. Why don't we have him come here right now so we can solve the problem together." Can you see how loyal the president was toward that man? I was embarrassed because the president was so right in what he was doing. I hesitated to say to him, "No, you go ahead and handle it. I just wanted you to be aware of the problem," because he was forcing me to take the responsible position, too. Well, the president got on the phone and invited this man to join us. Soon I could see this guy walking across the campus. Meanwhile, I was thinking, "I wonder if I communicated clearly? Maybe I'm partly responsible for this mess." By the time the housing director arrived, I was very mellow and humble. I was also very impressed by the character of this president, by his loyalty to the absent, even though it was embarrassing to me. The president was teaching me a correct principle the hard way.

When the housing director entered the room, my whole spirit had changed. I was nice to the guy: "How are you? Nice to see you." Just minutes before, I was criticizing the guy behind his back, so the president could sense my duplicity, adding to my embarrassment. But this was a powerful learning experience for me. I learned not to talk behind people's backs in ways that I would be ashamed to have them overhear. People who are present know you would do the same thing to them, especially if there was a strain on your relationship.

Story 2. One time I told this story in a speech. After my speech, an executive vice president of a large bank came up to me and said, "I've had a similar experience. I visited a branch bank and was served by one of the tellers. The service was so poor that I complained to the department head about the woman who served me. Most department heads are so awed by my very presence that they can hardly even deal with me. But this department head said, 'I'm sorry to hear about your bad experience. She's such a fine person. Let's call her in and talk this through together. Maybe you can tell her directly what your experience was.'" The VP then said to the department head, "No, go ahead and handle it. I just wanted you to be aware. I don't want to get involved." But the department head said to this executive VP, "Well I know that if it were me, I'd want to get involved. If you were this teller, wouldn't you want to be involved?" Imagine the courage it took for this department head to deal with the executive vice president of the bank in that direct, truthful manner. The answer was so self-evident: "Yeah, I guess I would." "Well, then, let's call her in." So she came in, and they dealt with it. The person received the feedback, and it was handled in a responsible way.

The vice president then told me, "Later when we were trying to select a president for one of our branch banks, I nominated this department head totally on the basis of that experience, because I knew if he would have such courage, honesty, and loyalty to someone who wasn't there in the face of a highly positioned individual, he would handle other matters with integrity. So I nominated that person to be the new president without knowing anything more about him."

Story 3. Once a manager of a remote service station trained his new attendants how to make higher-margin revenue from customers who drove into the station by teaching the attendants how to find problems inside a car that weren't there. So, when a car pulls in, the manager first sees the plates and says, "Notice this is an out-of-towner. That means you'll probably never see the person again. So probe to learn if the person knows anything about his car. Talk to him about some technical thing under the hood. You might say, 'Your starting motor looks like it might go out on you.' If the person says, 'Starting motor? What's that?' then you know you've got a total idiot, so you can do whatever you want." You then say, "Well, if it were my car, I wouldn't want to take a chance with my starting motor, especially driving through the desert. I could be stranded." "I can't have that happen. What should I do?" "Well, we could give you a good deal on a new one. I'll sell you one at cost and throw in all the labor free." So the victim thinks, "What a deal I got! I only had to pay \$200 for the starting motor. It was normally \$349 with labor." But the

manager winks at his attendants, knowing he has a 40-percent margin built into the price of the motor. Later, the attendants huddle and say to each other, "Now, if this guy would do that to his customers, how is he going to deal with us?" Each attendant knows that the manager will look for ways to cheat them as well.

Story 4. Once I was at the Canadian border, and I went into this store where there was a "half-price sale" going on. I started looking at a leather coat marked 50 percent off. I was the only customer in the store, but there were two salespeople and the owner-manager. The manager said to me, "What a deal this is." He really sold me on it. The coat fit me well, and I liked it. I then said to him, "Even with this discount, it could be expensive. How much duty would I have to pay?" He said, "None. You don't have to pay anything on this." I said, "Well, it says on the customs form that I must declare everything I purchase abroad." He said, "Don't worry about it. Just wear it. Everyone else does it." I said, "But I signed the form." He said, "Listen, mister, everyone does it. They won't even ask you questions. Just wear the coat when you cross the border. Don't worry about it." And I said, "Well, the thing that worries me most is what these two gentlemen behind you might think now about how you will deal with them on matters of commission, career training, and things of this nature." The manager and the two salespeople all blushed.

So What's the Big Deal?

Now, you might say, "Every organization has its competitors and its enemies. Why is it such a big deal to talk about them in a cavalier or casual way?"

It's a big deal because if you allow people around you to stereotype, castigate, and label others, you basically tell them that you would make snide remarks about them behind their backs. You tell them that you're not centered on principles; you're seeking gain, pleasure, or popularity at someone else's expense. If you talk loosely about a customer, you will likely talk loosely about employees. I think the key to the 99 is the one. If people know that if you treat one person with respect, then under a different circumstance you would likely treat them the same way, even if there was some strain or pressure added. In meetings, we often talk about people who are not in attendance in demeaning ways to undermine their position or cut their credibility in the eyes of others.

Many times I have defended people who are absent from meetings. I won't allow people around me to label and castigate those who are absent. When a glib remark is made, I'll say, "Wait a minute. That's not the way we want to talk about people." I may also point out what good that person has done. I may also be critical of the person, but I would not be ashamed to have the person there. When you defend the integrity of a person who is absent, what does that say to those who are present? It says that you would do the same thing for them. Sure, it takes courage to speak up at the time. It's much easier to just say nothing. But I believe that if we have a chance to defend others or to speak up for our cherished beliefs

and values, we need to do it. For example, I was talking to my son, Sean, about the debates at Harvard University regarding traditional family values. I counseled him not to take people on with a combative spirit and not to be the judge of others, but to speak up for the family and to do everything he can to preserve the traditional family.

Other Ways to Be Loyal

What are some other ways to be loyal? Here are seven.

1. **Defend the defenseless the outcast, the underdog, the low person on the totem pole, the minority, the scapegoat.** I like what Dag Hammerskold said: "It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses." When we attend to the one, it shows our character, and affects the many. Just look what we do in a democracy to preserve the rights of the one, even though we don't do it perfect justice. We aspire to the ideal of justice.
2. **Anticipate discussion and get clearance.** Suppose you know in advance of a meeting where some controversial person and position will be discussed. It would be wise to call that person and say, "I know you can't be present, but would it be all right if I talk about you or represent your position in this way?"
3. **Call the person after the discussion and report what was said.** You could call the person and say, "This is what happened, and this is what was said, and here is what we did." This is very important when you think what was said might get misrepresented. You might say, "I want to be clear on my intentions and what I said."
4. **Think of the customers who are not present.** The whole quality movement focuses on the customer. Business has gradually come to realize that customers and suppliers - all stakeholders - must be treated with respect.
5. **Bring up the background of the person or the context of the event.** With more geographic distance and cultural diversity, there's more potential for divisiveness and differences. When a person is being demeaned or talked about in a negative way, you may need to remind others: "This person is from a different culture or background, so rather than be such harsh critics, let's try to understand and give them the benefit of the doubt."
6. **Give people a chance to explain or defend their position or the circumstance in the next meeting.** Every person wants his or her day in court a chance to explain what happened and why.
7. **Bring up the bright side, the positive side of the person.** Once when I was meeting with members of a project team, team members started bashing a person whom they perceived to be a competitor. I said, "I don't think he would be comfortable with that judgment. I think he deserves better. He's one of the great presenters of our time." People often have an unconscious energy

about negative gossip. They may sense that their name is being used in vain, that their enemies are conspiring against them. I think that's more common than we know. I think people have a sixth sense for when they're being slighted. Also, I see that many "idle words" spoken in "secret" or written without consideration are later published or broadcast. So, one of the best reasons for defending people who are absent is that those idle words - those character assassinations, hasty judgments, and poor decisions - won't come back to haunt you.