

Payback?

Written by Shannon Warren for January, 2014 publication in The Journal Record.

If anyone had a reason for payback, it was South African President Nelson Mandela. After suffering egregiously cruel treatment by a racist government that wrongfully imprisoned him for 27 years, Mandela emerged on his own terms by taking an unconventional path.

As the country's first black president, Mandela surprised everyone by forgiving and then providing choice seats at his inauguration to his former captives, publicly embracing an all-white rugby team, and forming an alliance with former South African President F. W. de Klerk who had been complicit in the promotion of apartheid. It wasn't easy. In the latter case, Mandela and de Klerk continued to have deep-seated differences, but were ultimately able to work together for the well-being of their fellow citizens. Mandela never wavered in his commitment to democracy or compassion for the oppressed, but his winning strategy of exercising honor, rather than revenge, overcame extreme divisiveness.

While reflecting on Mandela's legacy, my mind wandered to a closer-to-home controversy involving Dan Cathy of Chick-Fil-A. In 2012, the conservative Christian business leader fostered a national debate when he disclosed his views on homosexuality. Although Cathy withdrew from the fray, it has remained on the public's mind and is still a touchy subject.

However, many are unaware that during the conflict, Cathy engaged in a dialogue that led to a friendship with one of his toughest critics: Shane Windmeyer, head of the LGBT group Campus Pride. As a result, both learned important lessons that prompted them to take more positive approaches. In a 2013 *Huffington Post* article, Windmeyer wrote, "I will not change my views, and Dan will likely not change his, but we can continue to listen, learn and appreciate "the blessing of growth" that happens when we know each other better."

Windmeyer makes a key point: "It is about sitting down at a table together and sharing our views as human beings, engaged in real, respectful, civil dialogue. Dan would probably call this act the biblical definition of hospitality. I would call it human decency."

Whether the leader of a nation or a corporation, these examples demonstrate the power of respect, humility, patience and grace in achieving the greater good for all. Certainly, there will be disagreements, but the paybacks for investing in considerate dialogue will lead us to building positive relationships. In today's diverse workplace, that's essential.

Shannon Warren is founder of the Oklahoma Business Ethics Consortium.