



Leadership and Respect

By Jim Selman



Respect is one of the values that we hear talked about a lot in organizations.

Respect is a word that always evokes a positive conversation—“Yes, respect is very important, we value respect, and we need to be more respectful and so forth.” The problem has been that

almost no one really thinks about or understands what it means to respect someone, create a culture of respect among people or, for that matter, what it means to be to be respected. Most of us believe that respect is an important value and that it is good. We do not normally think of respect as an action, but as a feeling or judgment about other people.

To understand and distinguish respect it is important to recognize that language is fundamental to how we see the world. **Language both opens possibilities and empowers us, or it closes possibilities and limits us.** For example, the word ‘respect’ derives from the Latin word ‘respectus’, which means “to look” or “to look back”. In thinking about this word, it also brings to mind the notion of ‘spectacles’, ‘spectator’ and ‘spectacular’. In other words, we can distinguish the term as having something to do with “looking” or “observing”. If we take the prefix ‘re’ to imply “again”, then we have the notion of respect as meaning something like “looking again”.

If we say we respect someone, we are ‘looking’ at the other person in a particular way—usually suggesting we are open to listen and honor each other’s views even if we disagree. If we say we don’t respect someone, we are generally closed to certain possibilities and conversations with them. Likewise, if we have ‘self-respect’ we are generally in a healthy internal conversation with ourselves. If we don’t respect ourselves, we

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will typically be stuck in all sorts of unproductive and unsatisfying ‘self-talk’. If we say that something is possible to someone we respect, we will more than likely have a productive and satisfying dialogue. If we don’t respect them, then we will more than likely be closed, not listen or in some cases disregard and dismiss them and their views outright.

‘Respect’ is just a word, but what it means and what it distinguishes for us can make all the difference in how we observe ourselves and others—as well as how we relate to future possibilities and choices. Our conventional wisdom considers ‘respect’ to be a kind of feeling or more often than not a judgment of a person’s ‘worthiness’. But respect can also be a declaration on the part of the person who is respecting another. If we take this to be the case, then respect is something else altogether. This article suggests that while ‘respect’ is always a context for relationship, we have a choice about whether it is created as an expression of our commitment to relating effectively with other human beings or whether it becomes part of a culture and worldview that separates and limits us.

Whether respect is declared or whether it occurs as a judgment, it is an expression of the way the person who is respecting or not respecting sees themselves and others.

Respect is in the eye of the beholder, and is not a function of the behavior or attributes of those we are relating to.

Further, we propose that to understand respect as an empowering concept, it must also be universal. If respect is a judgment, it becomes a tool of the ego and actually a source of separation and conflict between human beings. The alternative is to understand that respect is an action, a declaration and a

commitment on our part of who another person is separate and apart from whatever judgments we might have of their behavior.

Finally, if we can create a culture in which respect is universal and an expression of our commitment to each other as human beings and how we choose to “look at each other”, then we have a foundation for designing ways for collaboration and mutual empowerment that are simply not possible in the absence of authentic respect. I offer some ideas about how leaders can create a culture of universal respect. We believe that respect is the foundation for any serious discourse on coaching, leadership or building satisfying relationships with others. Without respect, there are no possibilities for trust, sharing a vision, for empowerment or for creating powerful teams and organizations.

Conventional Wisdom

‘Respect’ is one of the terms people often preach as a virtue but, in fact, can be used as a weapon for manipulation and control of others. For example, how often do we hear someone say, “I don’t feel respected” in a context of blaming others and demanding that ‘they’ change? We hear people use “not feeling respected” as a justification for all sorts of counterproductive and even destructive behavior, including being victims of their environment and prevailing systems of authority. Respect (or lack of it) is a core aspect of any recurring conflict situation, as well as an integral factor in most labor-management disputes. Many times we use the term and our feelings about respect to in effect say, “You should agree with me and behave the way I want you to or it means you don’t respect me (or justifies my not respecting you) and, therefore, I can rationalize doing just about anything I want without concern for you.”



Mostly we think about respect as a judgment based on our feelings. Alternatively, we can view respect as a commitment or a declaration of “who another is for us” or “who we are for ourselves”. Either way, respect is always in the eye of the beholder and it always becomes a context for relationship. For example, most of us will acknowledge that we have some list of negative assessments about ourselves and others—we think we (or they) are too lazy or not good-looking or “not competent enough”. When we believe our judgments are ‘truths’, we objectify ourselves and others and generally conclude whether we (or they) are worthy of our respect.

In an organizational or social context, our judgments and level of respect become the basis for how we relate to other people on a day-to-day basis.

In a personal and psychological context, self-judgments occur as ‘facts’ and typically means that our ‘self-esteem’ becomes hostage to whether we respect ourselves or not. Self-respect has exactly the same nature and character as our respect or lack of respect for others. In conversations with ourselves, we often find that we ‘know’ about ‘the way we are’ as if our assessments about ourselves are more ‘true’ than other people’s assessments of us. This condition of self-judgment inevitably becomes part of a closed worldview and can lead to all sorts of ‘self-referential’ behavior and ‘self-justification’, which upon close examination reveals an objectification of the ‘way we are’ and resignation that change is unlikely at best. Since most of us don’t claim perfection, this means that we become trapped in an interpretation of self in which something about the way we are isn’t okay and since we are that way it can’t change because our life

experience has provided the experiential proof that we are the way we think we are. The result is we don’t respect ourselves because we aren’t okay the way we are and we can’t (or haven’t been) successful in changing ourselves. Many people live large portions of their lives suffering in a closed ‘internal conversation’ about the way they, others and life “should be” without ever realizing that they are living in a state of disrespect for themselves, for life and for others.

That respect is fundamental to human relationships (and relationship with self) is not a new idea. What is new is the inquiry into whether it is possible to respect people with whom we strongly disagree and whose actions and behavior are inconsistent with what we value. We all use respect (or lack of respect) to determine how open we are, how trusting we are and how we choose to relate to others. For example, in growing up with my children, I have lived with a lot of the younger generation’s behavior that was inconsistent, foreign and even threatening to my own values and standards. Some of these behaviors included brightly colored hair, frequent use of strong scatological language, tattoos and body piercing. If I add to this an exceptionally open and casual attitude toward sex on the part of many young people and lots of experimentation with drugs and alcohol, then the list of ‘negative assessments’ begins to be significant. **Can I respect people who behave in these ways, even if they are my own children?**

I am not arguing intergenerational differences here. I am suggesting that if we think about it, there are many people (in every generation) who behave (for whatever reasons) in ways that push or exceed the limits of our own view of what is and what is not acceptable. When we have negative judgments, our assessments become the justification to give or not give



respect. In our everyday way of relating, we rarely notice that the judgments and assessments are one thing, and the conclusions and actions that follow are something else.

We blur this distinction and forget that respect is always and only something in the eye of the beholder and is never ‘caused’ by those we respect or don’t respect.

My proposition is that respect can be seen as an action and that it is possible to create a culture in which people naturally and authentically respect each other. To do this, however, we need to consider how we are looking at people already. That is, we need to observe that we are normally judging others in terms of our own values and practices. Our baseline for assessing others is essentially what we happen to believe at a given moment. The implication of this has to do with whether we can take someone seriously if they don’t meet or match our standards and beliefs. If we can’t take someone seriously, then we never have the conversations which could make a difference in how we relate or what is or isn’t possible for us in the future. When this occurs we become trapped in a vicious cycle of judgment—lack of respect—reaction, and more judgment that justifies more lack of respect.

It is, of course, possible to partially finesse the issue by trying to separate the ‘human being’ from his or her behavior... “I respect YOU, but don’t respect your behavior”. This does distinguish and separate the domain of ‘self’ from ‘behavior’ and does leave the individual whole, but is still based on having a superior judgment of which behaviors are worthy and which ones are not. Therefore, it is still a way of using respect in order to

maintain some degree of control over the other’s behavior. While separating ‘self’ from behavior is more responsible than simply writing off the whole human being as ‘unworthy’, it is still a trap which ultimately will undermine relationships, weaken practices for coordination and destroy any possibilities for breakthroughs.

Respect everyone?

We can’t talk about respect for very long before we consider the ‘who’ it is that is being respected or not respected. I am suggesting that we must respect everyone if the idea of respect is to make any sense other than as a tool for judging and manipulating behavior. The reason for this is that the simple act of judging whether someone (including ourselves) is worthy of our respect is to separate ourselves from the other person as a human being and assume a ‘superior’ relationship to them. To pass judgment from a position of superiority is in effect not seeing someone as having equal value, choice and responsibility for their actions.

To judge another as worthy or unworthy is itself an act of disrespect.

In this context, we are using the notion of respect as a weapon for control and domination....saying “I approve (or disapprove) of you and what you are doing” as if we were the Judge and in doing so implying that “If you want my respect, you must behave consistent with my standards — otherwise you are unworthy.”

If we don’t respect everyone then we can respect no one, including ourselves. As a judgment, respect is used by the ego as a means for remaining separate and apart from others. This can also form the foundation for justifying perpetuating conflict between



human beings. The alternative is to understand that **respect is an action, a declaration and a commitment on our part of who another person is separate and apart from whatever judgments we might have of their behavior.** This means that we do not sacrifice the background of relationship over our differences and disagreements. This is crucial since relationship is the foundation for any sort of collaborative enterprise, whether it is a nation, multinational corporation, a team or a marriage. As long as our relationships are intact, we have room to negotiate and design new ways of working together or, in some cases, to not work together—but as a choice and not as a reaction.

If respect means to “look again”, then the question is what are we looking for?

We can look at someone to garner evidence for our preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices or we can look for who they are as a possibility. As a coach, for example, I am always relating to a person in two domains...one is who I say they are as a possibility, the other is who they are in a context of my judgments and their history. My choice is in which context I will relate to them. If I relate to another in a context of possibility, then our work together is about their commitments, creating breakthroughs and producing unprecedented results. If I relate to them in a context of their past and my assessments, then the game typically becomes about me analyzing their behavior and attempting to ‘fix’ or control them.

Respecting everyone is a stand we can take...it is not reasonable and it is not based on people’s past behavior—it is “looking at people newly” as possibilities and as perfect in the context of their own lives. If we make

this shift, then we still have issues and differences, but we no longer give or withhold ourselves and our respect as a condition for the other person’s compliance with our point of view.

Creating a Culture of Respect

There are many ways to define culture. One way to see culture is that it is constituted by the everyday conversations that people have about ‘the way it is around here’. We can observe culture most directly by listening to the ‘hallway conversations’ in which people speak straight about what they think and ‘the way it really is’ for them. There are several reasons why this view is both powerful and useful. First, it allows us to create or change culture by simply changing our conversations and committing ourselves to new interpretations of ‘reality’. Secondly, it opens a perspective in which every individual can be personally responsible for the culture and participate in its persistence or change through how we speak and listen in each and every conversation every day. Finally, observing culture as conversation makes values such as respect ‘actionable’, since from this perspective words and commitments are actions in language. Our conversations can literally transform how we observe our environment, open new possibilities and allow us to see choices we might not otherwise observe.

Creating a culture of respect begins with a commitment to seeing everyone as worthy of respect.

We have already noted that while we don’t always have a choice about our automatic judgments and predispositions, we do have a choice about what our assessments mean and



the weight we give to them in our day-to-day relationships.

I want to emphasize that I am not proposing some sort of Pollyanna positive thinking about people. I am not suggesting that we somehow try to rationalize some sort of positive virtue in people that we otherwise don't respect. What I am proposing is that, as a practical matter, not respecting others costs each of us a great deal and contributes to the persistence of cultural practices that we say we don't want. If people are serious about creating a future that has larger possibilities for everyone, then it begins with creating a different cultural reality in which we universally respect each other.

Another aspect of creating a culture of respect is to observe how the absence of whatever we say we value occurs on a day-to-day basis. For example, when we are not respecting someone or we don't feel respected, does this occur as a breakdown for us—is it a call to action—does it produce new conversations to align and strengthen relationship, clarify different views and build greater confidence and trust? In a culture of respect there will be more straight talk (especially of negative assessments) because we respect each other. In a culture of respect all sorts of relationship issues, differences and lack of alignment become positive forces for change, not justifications for the status quo.

Obviously, one thing that would have to change is that we would need to “see the other persons newly”.... We would need to look again, look past our judgments and generate an interpretation of who that person is which would allow us to authentically respect them. We would need to become the source of respect as our context for relating and assume responsibility for whatever negative assessments we might have that would normally justify our lack of respect.

Conclusion

Human beings will always have judgments about themselves and others. It doesn't matter whether our judgments are positive or negative, since no judgment is ever true or false anyway, no matter how many may agree or disagree with it. However, we have a choice about what we conclude from our assessments and the secondary meanings we give to them. If our judgments of each other are negative and we conclude that, therefore, the other is not worthy of our respect or that we don't need to take each other seriously, then we are setting up an interpretation in which our actions are justified by assessments that were neither true or false in the first place. Further, we have created a context for our relationship in which ‘they’ are responsible for our judgments and assessments. In effect, we are setting up a structure of interpretation in which we are reacting to each other based upon what we are ‘observing’, but are blind to the fact that our observations have more to do with us and the ‘meaning’ we give to what we observe, than they do with the other person.

Respect is one of many values we seek to ‘enculturate’ in our organizations. Like all values it cannot be legislated or regulated into existence. It can be learned, it can be coached and it can be demonstrated by leaders everywhere. In the final analysis, respect is part of our ‘way of being’ in the world and is a product of both our commitment and our everyday practices. Respect as we have distinguished it here is a context for all relationships and can be created through commitment in our everyday conversations. It is not reasonable, nor does it happen naturally. It is a conscious expression of who we are, who we aspire to be and who we declare others are for us. Creating a culture of respect doesn't solve problems or predict any



particular behavior. It does, however, shift the context, our consciousness and the organizational paradigm in such a way as that we need not sacrifice our relationships in moments of conflict and fear. Moreover, when we respect others, we are able to consider our own responsibility for our disagreements and differences and, most of all, we can engage in dialogues to create a future in which everyone is included without perpetuating reactive cycles of distrust, resentment and acrimony....a future based on respect.

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