

Betsy Raskin Gullickson, Editor

# A Corporate Virus?

BY BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

The gophers have attacked my husband's tomatoes. This is no laughing matter. As a matter of fact, it points to an all-too-common business dilemma.

A few years ago, Gary built a 6' × 10' box on the ground outside my office window, filled it with good

dirt, and put in a few tomato plants. He got enough of a crop that we had some to share, garnering Gary grateful praise from friends and associates. The next year, he built a second box and planted more tomatoes, gave away even more, and got more praise.

Tomatoes became a driving ambition. Last winter, Gary leveled a section of the hill above our house and dug a 60-ft. trench in which he built three 20-ft. planter boxes. At the same time, he researched heirloom tomatoes on the Internet, cross-indexing varieties against several attributes (early vs. late ripening, color, size, taste). He ordered seeds and planted about 40, each seed in its own quart-sized milk

carton. He built wooden racks so that he could take the seedlings outside on warm days and rotate them as the sun traveled its arc over our driveway; at night, he put the cartons on the floor next to our furnace. In

March, he transplanted the baby vines outside. By late June, some of those plants were above Gary's head. All of them had blossoms and the first green balls that promised the fruit to come.

Which brings us to the gophers. Last year, they attacked from underground, leaving half-gnawed fruit behind; Gary lined the bottoms of the new boxes with pest-resistant hardware cloth to make that impos-

sible. While he slept, however, the gophers would climb up and gnaw the fruit near the bottom of the stalks. What could Gary do to ensure a plentiful crop—to meet expectations?

We felt like characters in the movie *Caddyshack*, in which Bill Murray plays a golf course groundskeeper beset by a gopher that is able to elude whatever Murray does in his efforts to get rid of it. He loses all perspective in obsessive pursuit. Eventually, Murray wages all-out war, setting dynamite charges that blow up the entire golf course. Ka-boom!

So we wrestled with conscience: Could Gary save his tomatoes *without* resorting to *Caddyshack*-type violence? Could he satisfy his ambition *and* stay in tune with nature? What's the middle way between disregarding everything but "the numbers" *and* being a doormat?

Not unlike the question at the heart of these columns: Can leaders meet corporate goals *and* create organizations that nurture what we call the "human dimension"?

There's no shortage of contrary evidence. For example, a recent *Newsweek* story linked a *Forbes*



report on billionaires with Transparency International's (TI) 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index. TI's Index defines corruption as "the abuse of public office for private gain." *Newsweek* noted: "Russia's reputation for honesty is ranked 143rd in the world....Japan's is far cleaner, in 17th place. Of the world's 83 individuals and families with a net worth of \$10 billion or more, though, Russia has 18. Japan has none." It seems that nice guys, indeed, finish last, reinforcing a scarcity mentality: "There's only so much good stuff to go around. I better grab mine—no matter who or what is sacrificed."

Typical is the observation of a consultant: "I recently met with a team that is unbelievably stressed. They are completely hungry—I mean ravenous—for 'human dimension' attention, which looks like: acknowledgment, a smile once in awhile, not to be told that they suck. They want to trust and be trusted, and they don't do either with any consistency or sustainability. Their boss is perpetually dissatisfied with numbers." She concludes: "The polarity of numbers vs. human dimension is a tough one for people to live in."

You know what? She's right. Bringing the human dimension into business isn't easy. I learned this painfully when I was asked to plan a meeting of upper-middle managers drawn from my company's offices throughout North America. Committed to a positive work environment, the CEO agreed to eschew "rah-rah" activities and to address deeper issues of respect. We brought in a facilitator who began by encouraging participants to clear their thinking and enter into the kind of reflection that makes room

for insight. As vanilla as that sounds, it was a negative trigger. Hard-chargers in the room, accustomed to "seeing 'em sweat," interpreted the facilitator's humility as fumbling, his exploratory approach as cluelessness. Rather than hanging out in the discomfort of unfamiliar quiet, they seized control of the meeting before it was half over and reverted to familiar patterns of excitement. Yes, meeting participants went home jazzed, but that feeling quickly faded. In short order, frustration reemerged from the long-term issues that had been untended and unresolved.

Nevertheless, I see hope for the human dimension in business. Health attracts health; confidence inspires confidence. If and when we show up clear and grounded, it's easier for others to access wisdom in themselves. If and when we resist the urge to find a quick fix and stay open, insightful solutions emerge from the collective unconscious.

We may not see sudden, sweeping change, or we may never know when someone we work with experiences a positive change. Yet by keeping our own bearings, we can make a difference. We become a kind of beneficial corporate virus—spreading the "contagion" of powerful intangibles: respect, resiliency, recognition that we are all connected to something larger than individual interest.

The biggest threat to more humane organizations isn't external—i.e., the competition for scarce resources and rewards. Rather, it's internal—the insidious temptation to be applauded as "The One Who Shows the Light." Paradoxically, we want to embrace a new way of working while clinging to an old system of reward.

It's normal to ask, "What's the

point of lonely struggle? Why keep pushing for something that gets no recognition?" For example, one HR manager notes: "This is a very good organization; compared to lots of others that I know, it's sensitive to the human dimension. But when the owners have to choose, the focus is on numbers—and they rely on hard-drivers who can deliver. Our executive VP drives for short-term results by controlling, insulting, and demoralizing people; boosting his ego; and showing off like a peacock. Top management is aware of this. But he gets things done, so they consider his style and the culture he creates as minor issues.

"An up-and-coming manager sees that to constantly show up in a different way would require a lot of time, energy, and effort. Her question is, 'Why should I do this? At the end of the day, I'm not a saint or a hero. I can do my job and earn the money my position offers without trying to change the world around me.'"

It's a fair question and an understandable choice. But as 19th Century author/clergyman Edward Everett Hale wrote: "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."

The tougher things get, the more insistent the demands for results. Must organizations go the way of *Caddyshack*, or can commitment to the human dimension change business? The problem is institutional, but the solution is personal. ■

*Betsy Gullickson is an executive coach and coauthor, with Bob Gunn, of On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted ([bgullickson@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bgullickson@sbcglobal.net)).*