

# Amish-like compassion helps leaders

Watching how the Amish reacted to the horrific and senseless slaying of schoolchildren in Pennsylvania last October has left a permanent imprint in my mind. Reading about their behavior has left a special place in my heart. Leaders can learn a lot from their capacity for forgiveness.

According to a New York Times article published shortly after the tragedy, it is not unusual for the Amish to reach out to those who hurt them. "When an Amish dies in a car accident, the motorist is often invited to the funeral ... because such encounters help survivors heal," the article said. It was reported that an Amish neighbor wrapped his arms around the gunman, Carl Roberts IV, for an hour while expressing words of forgiveness.

These actions communicate that there's no grudge and it helps them let go in order to move on with their lives.

Lee Zook, an associate professor of social work at Luther College who specializes in legal issues and the Amish, says that for the Amish, "death at any age, and for any reason, is more accepted as a part of life and nature than it is

in the larger culture. There's a matter-of-factness about death and dying."

In the larger culture in which we live, the trend in leadership has been toward the hero leader who is charismatic and placed on a pedestal by followers. The dark side of this model is leaders' fear of showing vulnerability by displaying any weakness, imperfection or insecurity. Often these fears are masked in excessive pride that expresses itself as arrogance, a sense of entitlement, difficulty accepting responsibility for mistakes

and addiction to perfection.

When these fears are not addressed, it is often difficult to accept imperfections in others. Roger Walsh, in his book "Essential Spirituality," says that both fear and pride lead to actions that are defensive and offensive, and result in anger, impatience and intolerance.

Yet, leaders are human, and people make mistakes. Sincerely apologizing for mistakes made and forgiving others for their imperfections are powerful actions for leaders to take. In order to help people face their fears, I adapted a



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## Second in a series

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field exercise from Andre Delbeq, who teaches a Spirituality for Business Leadership M.B.A. course at Santa Clara University. The purpose of the exercise is for people to go to the place of suffering they most fear. If they fear death, they have an encounter with the dying. If they fear being disabled, they visit with people who have disabilities.

The choice is left up to them, but the focus is to listen to the individual's story in order to develop an understanding and compassion. Though leaders, through economic position and role, are often sought out as potential benefactors or contributors to those less fortunate, the purpose of the exercise is: being with, rather than doing for; listening to and learning from; and reflecting on the experience in order to face our fears.

Observing the Amish can teach leaders to practice compassion and forgiveness. When such behavior is demonstrated, leaders cast more light than darkness in the workplace. If leadership is more about who we are than about what we do, then who are we? □

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