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Lead the Way: Leading with Humanity

Skills and Professional Development



Have you ever noticed when you have an epiphany, or solidify a lesson, that all signs point in that direction? I recently had that experience with last month's column. Almost as soon as I hit send and shipped "Just One Step" off to my editor, I came across a friend's Facebook post detailing an experience she had that not only broke her heart, but drove her to action.

Briefly, Christine happened upon a homeless family, but instead of passing by like she might have, she stopped to engage the mother. Rather than walking by and thinking the family had nothing to do with her, she learned this family's story. The beauty of what Christine did — and what reminded me of a situation that I encountered about a year ago — was her decision to do something. It wasn't about solving the entire homeless problem; it was simply about taking action — any action. Christine then built upon that first act and capitalized on her ability to convince others to do the same.

My story is similar to Christine's. I met this young man sitting outside a plaza asking people for food money. I was in a rush and had already passed him when a voice in my head made me stop. When I turned around, I saw a young man, who was cold, hungry, and alone. I fished a few dollars out of my purse and gave it to him, then started again toward my destination. I only managed to get a few steps away before I stopped and went back to talk to him. As I looked at him (I'll call him MJ), I saw that he was really still a kid, a scared kid.

MJ was soft-spoken, gracious, and grateful that I actually took the time to talk to him. He told me about leaving home to come to Sacramento for a better opportunity to find a job. He didn't find work

and his housing situation fell through, which was why he was on the street begging. He and his sister were trying to get into a shelter, but were being turned away because they were full. They resigned to sleeping on the street. The thought of this kid sleeping on the streets was more than I could take.

Because I had a meeting that I needed to get to, I left him there. We exchanged phone numbers and I told him I would figure out a way to help. As I walked down the street, I kept wondering what I could do. I wasn't in a position to take care of these kids. I wasn't a homeless advocate and I wasn't familiar with resources in the city. However, I did have a couple of things going for me. One, I had some money in the bank and two, I belonged to a church that was part of a coalition of churches that hosted a program called "Winter Sanctuary."

I got him a hotel room for a couple of nights and called the church to ask about how people got into Winter Sanctuary. It took several phone calls, one organization after another, but I finally spoke to someone who was able to tell me the steps that MJ needed to take to get placed in a shelter and, eventually, temporary housing for a year. I have to admit, as I was making calls, I was feeling overwhelmed and wondering why I was even involved. As I thought about both my and Christine's experiences, it dawned on me that it was just one step, just one thing, just one family, and just one kid. We were not saving everybody, we weren't solving homelessness (not to say that we couldn't) but the bottom line was that we didn't have to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of homelessness when we did what we did.

I used these examples not in an attempt to solve the plight of the homeless, but to drive home the point that no matter how difficult the situation or overwhelming the problem, our job as leaders is to assess the situation and see what we can do to make a difference.

We have just witnessed a number of natural disasters, as well as a few man-made tragedies, and it is easy to do nothing in the wake of overwhelming need. But our job as humans is not to do everything, but just to do something — one thing. Use the gifts, talents, and resources at our disposal to take a step that lessens the pain or improves the lives of those who are walking this journey with us.

[Whitnie Wiley](#)



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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.