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Is Power More TRUMP or GUMP?

Psychologist Sylvia Lafair has counseled leaders for 30 years.
What really works may surprise you.

High above Manhattan, the four survivors on *The Apprentice* are listening as the whirl of Donald Trump's helicopter blends with his enticing voice. His message: This too could be yours. Only one will win and be initiated into his version of the good life, which includes power, prestige and unlimited wealth. The rest, well, they'll be fired.

This basic survival of the fittest model playing out in office settings around the world indicates that career success and power are still defined through possessions and status and that if there are winners there must be losers.

Remember Forrest Gump? Fictional folk hero of the early '90s with his Zen-like quality of following the forces of synchronicity. His message: Power and success are available to all of us if we trust the intelligence of our whole self, not relying only on our rational mind but understanding that relatedness is a key organizing principle of life.

Leaders have
the power
to create
environments
of safety and
openness.

Mike, a vice president of sales in a large apparel company, had a lot to learn from Forrest Gump. He grew up in the Donald Trump world of winners and losers. He had climbed the ladder of success by stepping on others' toes and fingers on his rise to power.

His prestigious national accounts team complained to human resources that he was playing favorites and would not talk to them about their concerns. Led by Roberta, a strong-willed and talented individual, they requested a meeting to discuss the issues.

The day of the off-site was as gray as Mike's mood. He immediately claimed his positional power and told the group that while he would certainly listen to them, they needed to remember he was the one in charge. At the end of the meeting if they did not like his leadership, they could "vote with their feet." There were, he reminded them, lots of people hungry for these important jobs.

The day was a waste. No one except Roberta spoke up. Even she backpedaled, and comments were superficial and filled with platitudes. Mike

went to dinner alone. He had had enough with employees he felt were spoiled and ungrateful. As fate would have it, Mike was seated next to three angry, noisy business people complaining about their defensive and stubborn boss. "If only he would be real, maybe we could work together," was their plaintive cry.

Mike walked back to his hotel room thinking about this other boss who had to put up with similar annoyances and soon began to wonder about his own defensiveness. Fate had more in store. Mike had a dream he was 9 years old and was in trouble for not asking permission to play at a friend's house after school. He woke with his body tense and a terrible headache. He felt the anger rise as he remembered how his mother ranted and raved even after he apologized several times.

Suddenly it all made sense. The forces of synchronicity had connected. He saw where his defensiveness had started. He sighed as he put together the puzzle pieces and realized that his anger with Roberta felt the same as his anger with his mother. Strong, determined and judging women were his Achilles' heel. He now had the real power to handle the off-site.

He was a calmer and more authentic Mike as he began the meeting. He told his team about the dinner and how he was able to observe his own defensiveness. He apologized to Roberta for the

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Is Power More Trump or Gump? *(continued)*



intensity of his reactions to her. He wanted to really hear what they had to say and wanted to find better ways of communicating. And then an interesting thing happened. The courage he exhibited by telling the truth sparked the group to realness and honesty.

They talked about the “you’re fired” mind-set as one born out of old patterns when there was no possibility of discussion. They agreed to monthly meetings to explore the differences between positional and personal power. They wanted to understand how they could take what they learned to their own direct reports. They felt energized by the meeting and optimistic about working together.


By the end of the year Mike’s team had produced remarkable results. Other areas — marketing, finance, purchasing — came to ask what they were doing differently.

It was clear that leaders have the power to create environments of safety and openness. It was also clear that it starts with a willingness to observe one’s own behavior. When there is an opportunity for teams to explore their interconnectedness and discover their inner knowing and inner resources, there can be remarkable bottom-line results. Teams that are truly empowered have fewer sick days and avoid the litigation trap so prevalent in workplaces where people feel they have no internal power.

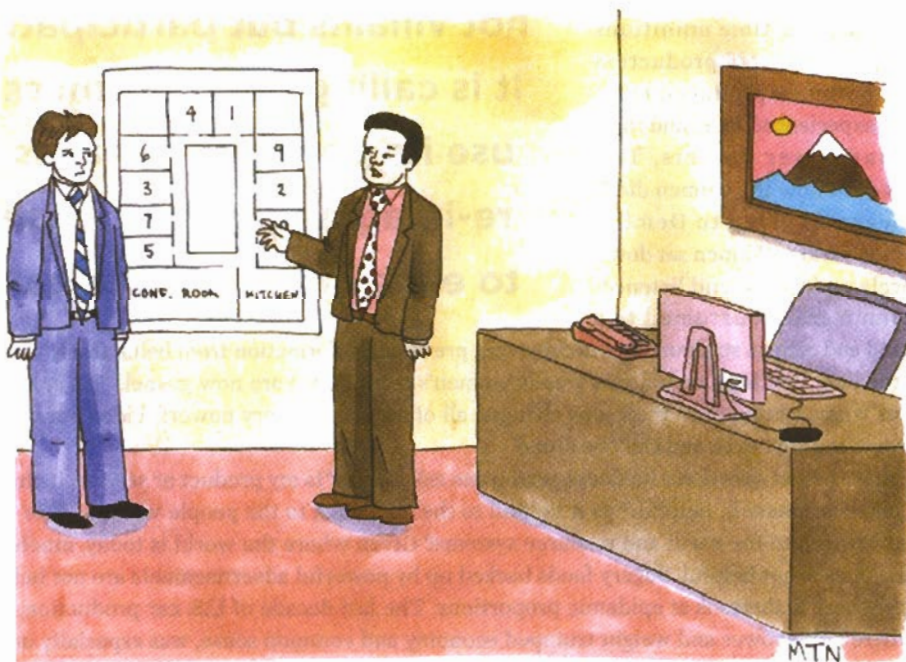
The trend to collaborative and conscious workplaces is slowly beginning to take hold. Richard Harris, president of Spa Sydell in Atlanta, has used the philosophy of connectedness to create a company where employees grow and prosper, and clients are nurtured and appreciated. “Ours is a family-owned business and what I have learned is that the essence of the company starts with the values of the core group. My parents, my sister Karen and I have worked hard to make sure our relationships are solid. Together we have searched for the values we want as the foundation on which the whole company can stand.”

Debra Neill, CEO of The Neill Corp., the largest distributor of Aveda products in the United States and based just outside New Orleans, is sure that being authentic is good business. “We cried and laughed together during those awful weeks post-Katrina. Telling the truth and being open is important modeling for the employees who want to live up to the standards set by the company. We came through that time a closer and more capable company. We all know that we are all better able to handle difficulties and give and get support. What great things to learn in our work environment.”

Dr. Eslie Dennis, head of consumer education at Novartis Pharmaceuticals, based in Hanover, N.J., has seen amazing results as her team agreed to put time aside to know each other as human beings, not just “human doings.” They have set up a system where they combine strategic and creative planning and get more done more quickly than ever before. She encourages all teams to find their own model of collaboration. “We always come up with more vital ideas and solutions than any one of us could have developed alone.”

So it seems Forrest Gump is pointing us in the right direction. What really makes life matter — sharing, caring, doing right for others — infuses us with power that outlasts titles or corner offices and keeps a light shining on our good work, often well beyond our own lives. 

Sylvia Lafair, Ph.D., is co-founder and president of Creative Energy Options Inc. She holds a doctorate in clinical psychology, has taught at Hahnemann University, and is an executive coach and leadership educator. She has worked for more than 30 years with all levels of management, from leading business owners and corporate officers to mid-level managers and high-potential leaders.



“And here’s the office floor plan. The numbers indicate the recommended sequence in which to step on people on your way to the top.”