

Leadership Lessons from a Broom Closet

The Sign That Started It All

Employees must wash their hands before returning to work.

It's a sign we've all seen, perhaps even overlooked, in countless restrooms. But it became a quirky chapter in my early career, offering profound lessons about trust, integrity, and leadership.

Starting Out in the Broom Closet

I began my corporate journey in Hershey's Sales Development group, a dynamic environment where top-performing, high-potential professionals honed their skills before taking on leadership roles in the field. It was an honor to be part of this group, and the camaraderie often felt like being in a fraternity—complete with a bit of good-natured hazing for the newbies. As the new kid on the block, I was assigned to the worst office on the floor—a literal broom closet next to the men's restroom. My "office" was so small it barely fit a desk, a chair, and a mop bucket.

Observing Human Behavior

Being stationed next to the restroom had its quirks. I couldn't help but notice my colleagues' comings and goings. Whether I liked it or not, I became acutely aware of their handwashing habits. To my surprise, not everyone washed their hands.

One day, the VP of Sales, Justin, stopped by to check on me and, true to the group's style, engage in a little lighthearted hazing. During our conversation, I mentioned my unintended observation about hygiene habits. Justin, ever the

germophobe, found this both hilarious and horrifying. He proposed a tongue-in-cheek task: keep a list of who washed their hands and who didn't. It became a running joke. Whenever Justin visited, I'd share my "findings," and he'd react with mock disgust.

From Humor to Influence

But here's the kicker: Justin's awareness of this informal "data" began influencing his interactions. If he knew someone didn't wash their hands, he'd opt for a fist bump or raise his hand in greeting. This was long before fist bumps became mainstream. And every time he avoided a handshake, he'd glance my way with a knowing wink. It was a strange, slightly awkward dynamic, but it was also oddly revealing.

Lessons in Trust and Integrity

Eventually, as my career progressed, I moved out of the broom closet and into a proper office. But the lessons from that peculiar episode stayed with me. On the surface, it's a funny story about hygiene quirks and office humor. Beneath that, it's a powerful reminder of how trust and integrity manifest in the workplace. Whether adhering to hygiene standards or respecting the confidentiality of a good-natured joke, these small actions contribute to the foundation of a trustworthy and respectful environment.

Retelling the Story

Interestingly, when I first shared this story publicly, I was criticized. Some said the story might tarnish my brand—that people wouldn't trust me because I'd kept track of who washed their hands and who didn't. They advised me not to share it, suggesting it was unprofessional and could be perceived as judgmental. Honestly, their reaction made me mad. It felt like censorship, an attempt to stifle an authentic moment from my career that carried valuable lessons. I've reflected on their concerns, but here I am, retelling the story—because it's

funny, real, and makes a point.

Leadership Lessons

So, what leadership lessons can we draw from this? Here are three memorable principles:

- *Little Actions Reflect Big Values.* Something as simple as washing your hands can speak volumes about personal integrity. Leaders and colleagues notice these small behaviors, which can either build or erode trust over time.
- *Trust is Built in the Margins.* Unspoken moments—a wink, a fist bump, or keeping a lighthearted promise—often cement relationships. Leaders who cultivate trust in these small ways create stronger, more cohesive teams.
- *Integrity is Contagious.* Just as poor hygiene can spread germs, a lack of integrity can infect an organization. Conversely, modeling integrity in small ways inspires others to rise to the same standard.

A Quirky Beginning with Timeless Lessons

Looking back, my broom closet office wasn't just a humble starting point; it was a front-row seat to observing human behavior, a quirky social experiment, and a foundation for learning timeless leadership principles. To this day, every time I see that familiar sign in a restroom, I'm reminded that leadership often starts with how we show up in the slightest, most overlooked moments—even something as simple as washing our hands.

For more leadership insights and stories, visit prestonpoore.com.