



Gold or Platinum

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The most important rule in business is the one your parents taught you. The famous "Golden Rule" applies to nearly every situation and will normally provide the right answer to any quandary about what to do.

If more leaders would simply treat other people as they would like to be treated, we would have a major improvement in culture in organizations. There is one significant challenge to the Golden Rule that is a special case.

Let's say that I am a leader in an organization, and I am most happy when stacked up with so much work that it seems impossible to get it all done. I just love to be overloaded. If I would treat everyone around me by piling more work on them than they can handle, that is not going to produce happy or productive workers.

So, in the special case, where a leader wants things that other people would not appreciate, the Golden Rule breaks down. I claim that does not happen very often, but we do need to allow for the possibility before blindly applying the Golden Rule.

Knowing this conundrum, people got clever and invented the "Platinum Rule," which states, "Treat other people the way *they* want to be treated." The Platinum Rule was posited by Karl Popper in World War II in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. That rule seems to avoid the problems with the Golden Rule, but when you stop and think about it, the Platinum Rule has even more flaws than the Golden Rule. Reason: all people would like more money, less work, more freedom, less responsibility, more cake, etc.

If a leader of an organization would follow the Platinum Rule, it would be a disaster, because the business would quickly go bankrupt. Giving people everything they want would not be good for them or the business.

So, if you cannot always treat people the way you want to be treated, or treat them the way they want to be treated, how do you treat them? The answer is disarmingly simple. You need to treat people the right way. What does this mean?

Treating people the right way means understanding a lot of things at once. Here are some considerations you must think about before deciding how to treat people.

1. What are their needs? Each person in the world is unique. We cannot assume that what is a good policy toward one person will work for others. When you treat everyone the same way, you are actually discriminating because you inadvertently favor one over the other. John Wooden, the famous basketball coach from UCLA, once said, "The most sure way to play favorites is to treat every player the same way." That quote sounds backward until you stop and think about it.

2. What is in their best interest? Many people lust after things that would cause them harm. Just step inside a jail, and you will see that the overwhelming majority of people are there because they tried to beat the system or break rules. But here we also need to use judgment, because what may not be in the best interest to one person may be perfectly okay for someone else.

For example, throwing an ice cream social for employees might be a positive event, but if some of the employees have diabetes, the party may be ill advised. When leaders try to determine what is in the best interest of an individual, it is a little like playing God. A leader cannot fully comprehend what an individual is experiencing in life, so trying to guess what is in the person's best interest is never a perfect science.

3. What is right for the organization? It is often the case that people cannot have everything they want in order for the organization to survive. We can invent a set of rules for a utopian existence for employees, but ultimately they will not be employed very long because the organization will die quickly. Leaders need to consider a complex blend of individual and organizational needs before making up rules.

4. What is right for the planet? We are increasingly aware that our fragile spaceship is hurting. Life is already becoming intolerable with brutal swings in weather patterns. It is not hard to imagine the suffering that mankind will be forced to endure if we are unable to reverse the trends we already see. We do not want it to be too hot or too cold or too dry or too wet. We don't want 30 foot waves crashing through our front windows. We would prefer that tornados become a thing of the past and earthquakes stop their rumbling. When you stop and think about the very narrow set of conditions in which we are comfortable and all the possible ways things can go wrong, it is a miracle we have managed to survive as a species so long.

5. What treatment shows people that we care? That is a complex question, because we care about a lot of things simultaneously. We need to balance all these things and make judgments in how we treat people. Given the infinite variety of people and conditions, that means some people are not always going to feel well served.

While we need to keep all these questions in play, my thesis is that the good-old "Golden Rule" is a pretty good first approximation for how to treat others. It takes into account all of the variables above, and it works in most cases. If you are a person who would want what others do not want, you need to make the appropriate adjustment to the rule, but for the rest of us, we should seek to treat others the way we would like to be treated if the roles and situations were reversed.

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