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Is McGuinty the harbinger of a kinder, gentler workplace? Ontarians seem to be craving more civility

Mark Swartz -
October 15, 2003

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Ever see the Planet of the Apes remake? You know, with Marky Mark Wahlberg as the hero? I liked the part where Wahlberg's simian companion, Helena Carter as Ari, sighs resignedly, 'The universe seems to reward cruelty with power.' Wahlberg responds splendidly with, 'No. Not if we fight back.'

Of course, storming the barricades isn't the only route to change. Just last week we peacefully voted in a new regime by electing Dalton McGuinty as premier. Call it a yearning for decency, or maybe just fatigue from cynicism. Whatever prompted his victory, it appears we're tiring of dishonesty and callousness. Does this herald a trend that will spill over into the workplace?

It could, especially if people have had their fill of corporate scandals and newscasts of senior executives being led in shackles to country club prisons.

Which leads us back to McGuinty. Here's a guy who emerged victorious by being authentic and keeping it clean.

In itself, this could be a harbinger of hope from which we can take these encouraging findings.

First, being yourself is not necessarily the kiss of death when you're seeking employment. This is especially true if you: have the right message for the right audience, and are prepared to stick to your guns; persevere in the face of pressure to lower your

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standards; are willing to learn from your earlier errors; and communicate who you are consistently in all ways.

McGuinty's advertising strategist, Peter Byrne (of the "I am Canadian" ad fame), says, "This was a 'let Dalton be Dalton' campaign'."

Byrne adds, "I knew we had to take the high road. If we got down in the gutter with them, we'd be playing their game."

The second lesson is that niceness and sincerity are endemic to our nature. This was driven home recently when I addressed a group of senior executives who had recently lost their jobs. The room was packed with former vice-presidents and chief executive officers from major corporations.

Know what these super-achievers enjoyed most? It was talking about the most selfless, positive things they had ever done in the workplace. Problem was they often got walked over for simply doing the right thing, or for trying to be humane.

Many of us really are craving more civility. There's a growing backlash to the North American shift toward social Darwinism. SES Canada Research Inc., a public opinion and marketing research firm, released results last week of a poll it conducted this summer.

The upshot is that "Canadians view patriotism and business as being the bedrock of America's strength, but do not align with the U.S. when it comes to respect for diversity, education, social programs and arts/culture," according to Nik Nanos of SES.

Are there signs of change appearing around us in all sorts of early ways? The media is one indicator. Two magazines have recently sprung up that deal with tough issues head on: *Corporate Knights* looks at how employers can be socially responsible while churning out a profit; and *Your Workplace* tackles the stickier points of being an employee in today's hyper-competitive marketplace.

On the legal front, the U.S. passed the Sarbanes-Oxley Act last year, promoting more accurate corporate reporting and providing a measure of protection for whistleblowers. And, inadvertently, it covers Canadians who work for multi-nationals.

Mind you, the real battle begins every weekday morning as we head off to work. Wouldn't it be great if we could basically be who we are, do our best, get rewarded for merit and effort, yet still practise such fundamentals as fairness, kindness, unselfishness and patience?

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Couldn't we use workplace civility even more now, with stress-related costs becoming the single fastest-rising expense in the North American economy?

Granted, there may not be definitive answers. But it does seem as if the right concerns are starting to get aired. Youthography, a Toronto-based marketing consultancy, posted results last week of its survey of 15-29 year olds. Not only did McGuinty score as the leader they trusted most, but "There is a sense of getting back to something more genuine. There's an earnestness there that's trying to get out," says Mike D'Abramo, an executive at Youthography.

Something to think about the next time you're tempted to vilify your evil reptilian kitten-eating boss from another planet. As for me, I'll be scratching my pointy head and watching carefully. I'm not sure if McGuinty's tapped into a broader movement or if the alternatives were considered worse. In any event, we'll soon enough see if corporate Canada takes this as a wake-up call or if we collectively roll over and hit the snooze button.

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