

Celebrating Second Chances

Karen Diefendorf

Karen Diefendorf is director of chaplain services at Tyson Foods. She is a former military chaplain with more than 33 years of experience in ministry. Tyson Foods' chaplaincy program includes more than 90 chaplains who provide pastoral care, counseling and support to team members at many of the company's plant and office locations.

None of us can remain whole if part of us is left "in the parking lot." In fact, the implication that this is even a possibility is ludicrous. Whatever the stressors, they are internalized and come right in the door with us. And what you and I **believe** about those stressors can have more impact on us than the stressors themselves. Those beliefs impact how we process the events of the day. And, those beliefs may be religious or philosophical, but they come with us to work.

For those who come from a religious beliefs perspective, work may be grounded in one's understanding of God. For the Abrahamic faiths (Jewish, Christian and Muslim), God worked as Creator. God made humanity in God's image and thus, we also Work...not as punishment, but as ones being co-laborers with God for the care of the world and its inhabitants. Work provides meaning and purposefulness.

One may have a philosophical understanding and even use the term "faith" as one of our chaplains, Chaplain Earl, described it. "A person comes to work. Why should they make the effort? Because they believe they will be rewarded for their effort. When a person signs up for payroll the faith structure forms. The employee believes that they will be rewarded for their time in an agreed manner. When the time comes, the employee's faith structure is reinforced by the presentation of a paycheck in whatever form. The reinforcement of the faith structure enables the person to plan and expend energy to create, make, and otherwise commit to various goals and objectives in other arenas. As long as the reinforcement continues as scheduled, the employee develops a strong faith structure.

On the other side, an employee goes through a layoff. The team member's faith structure in the reward system is shaken. What they believed would happen regularly is threatened. Perhaps their position is phased out, transferred to another location or another position. Uncertainty and fears replaced confidence and hope. Team members live in an uncertain fear of losing their job. The certainty of the faith structure is replaced by fear of loss. This is a prime opportunity for a chaplain to talk about faith understandings"

When our Team Members know that they can talk about their most important values in the workplace, they are freer to trust that they don't have to pretend that everything is alright. I hear countless stories like the mother who approached one of our chaplains because she was concerned about possible domestic violence. The chaplain helped provide intervention resources but because this woman found prayer meaningful, she prayed with and for our employee. Chaplain Terry finds that supervisors are more open to referring their Team Members for help or just a listening ear. "A young maintenance worker was referred to me by his supervisor. He was distraught about his wife's changed attitude after their marriage. He said that when they lived together she was fun and life was good with her. He didn't know what changed but he felt he was doing all the "work" to keep the marriage together and he was beginning to think it was not worth it. His attitude toward his wife was very poor and his language to describe her was foul and put her in a very poor light. Over weeks that followed we explored other ways to look at his needs, the impact of their change of status between them and his expectations. God/religion was a very faint part of the picture but over time he said he would give it some thought. We agreed that he should

love her unconditionally, establish appropriate boundaries and pray to see what happened. We agreed he had nothing to lose by trying. Something, (I don't know what) changed. He disappeared off my radar for a month or so until one day I found him in the cafeteria. I asked, "Say, Calvin (not his name) how is it going? He responds, "Things are a lot better. We are talking a lot more now and she is helping with the house. Things are more the way I hoped they would be. We have started attending a church in town and the preacher makes a lot of sense. We are good!" To me Calvin seemed calm and hope filled toward the future. He has remained tender and caring for his wife in the months that have followed. He has changed from a man distraught, upset and not able to focus or sleep to a calm and loving husband looking forward to the future. I cannot tell anyone what changed, but I think he somehow connected with God in a deeper way and they worked out a way for him to heal from past wounds and the distance he felt with his wife. His life is changed and he is contented at work and looks forward to tomorrow."

Chaplain Duane reflected on the many needs he sees. "One thing that comes to mind is that we have a lot of people in various stages of recovery from one kind of addiction or another and faith is often a central part of their recovery. I think just our presence as chaplains represents something of a spiritual conscience for some people and we serve as a reminder of their commitment to remain sober."

We also talk with a number of people being abused in a relationship. They feel they need to get out but feel guilty, disloyal and feel like a sinner if they leave. Relieving some of the guilt and giving people "permission" to leave seems to help people take a step they need to take."

Our chaplains often talk about the "ripple effects" of the freedom to bring faith to work. "Tending to the spiritual needs of our Team Members impacts more people than we as Chaplains can possibly imagine. It's not just about meeting people's needs. It's all about stepping into what God is doing in the life of an individual. We are merely blessed with the opportunity to be part what God is doing in their lives."

One of Tyson's core values is Caring. There is a corporate culture that includes a prayer chain for any who want to be involved. Those requests for prayer often lead to Team Members reaching out in very tangible ways, whether it's ensuring meals get sent to the home of one recovering from surgery or a group showing up to repair a ramp for a physically impaired family member.

One can imagine being a new employee going through orientation and learning about Tyson's value that we "strive to be a faith-friendly and inclusive" workplace. During the Chaplain Services orientation portion, one of our chaplains, Chaplain Yolanda, shares a perspective on getting a second chance.

"Typically, when I am offering my presentation as part of orientation, I will tell the group about Tyson's faith friendliness and their belief that everyone deserves a second chance and deserves an opportunity to rebuild their lives. I will gently mention that my belief system says God is a God of second chances.

I will share with them how I have talked to team members who would find themselves working for company and be a good 6-7 weeks into a position, only for their background check to come back and not be favorable and they find themselves out of a job, having to start the process of trying to find a job all over again. They will talk about how defeating that is for them as an individual and for their families.

I will talk about my experience of my father and of us being estranged for years and how we reconciled our differences in the last few years of his life (didn't know it was the last years of his life). It wasn't until my sister and I were settling his affairs that we realized how his going to prison and meant when he was released that he had to rebuild his life all over again. We did not know about Tysons. In one of the

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orientation meetings as I completed the sharing of that story, a recent “hire” began to share with the group, how the second chance ethic had changed his life. As he shared about his life, it opened the door for those who were just starting to talk about their hopefulness in coming to Tyson. It was a powerful awakening in general, along with an opportunity to build community within the Tyson plant.”

Can you imagine how much different our work culture would be if people believed they had to hide who they are; had to miss out on celebrating a second chance; couldn’t discuss openly their fears that jobs might be lost? And think about all of the things management might never know if our Team Members believed they had no voice.

Bringing one’s whole self to work isn’t just good for the worker; it’s essential for any business that wants to thrive.