

The Trail Factor

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When my young nephew was two years old he would look up to the sky looking for airplanes cruising at high altitudes. At first I wondered why he looked for airplanes when there was no apparent airplane noise in the area. When he eventually located an aircraft, cruising at well over 30,000 feet, he would point his little finger up to the sky and shout, "airplane, airplane." And he would be right every time. At that age my nephew had learnt to locate the long vapor trail produced by aircrafts flying at high altitudes. He knew that if he located a vapor trail, there would be an airplane at the leading edge of it.

I introduced this concept of a trail in my book, *Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*. I made the case that certain attributes (or factors) about a person contribute to the way a specific category of respect is gained and lost. I illustrated how some of these factors may leave a trail that would enable other people, at some time in the future, to trace elements of those factors back to the person. I have since received some feedback on this concept from readers and I thought I'd cover it a bit more here using some practical scenarios in the following story.

Trail

A trail is a series of past occurrences that may be easily connected to a current situation. Think of a trail as cookie crumbs that you leave behind, which may be used to retrace your steps.

John arrived at the main building of the company facility. After parking his car he proceeded to the corner office on the second floor. As he walked through the hallways, he observed a few personnel in their offices preparing to start a brand new work week. He gave a nod to a few eyes that connected with his and responded in kind to a few, "Good morning" expressions from several employees. They seemed to know who he was.

He was soon seated in his chair in the large corner office. He looked at his watch to confirm that he had a little over an hour before the start of business. A team of five senior level personnel would soon converge in his office for a meeting that he had prearranged. He had prepared for this day for many weeks and he was moments away from starting a new chapter in his career.

Twenty miles away, downtown, Janet—John's wife—was preparing to start her day as well. She was a deputy director in the finance department of a major company with its headquarters in the heart of the business district. Not long after Janet had settled down, preparing to check her email messages, her telephone rang. She promptly answered it.

"Janet speaking."

"Morning Janet. This is Patricia, How are you?"

"Hi Patricia. I am well, thank you. How about you?"

"Good, thanks. I want to bring you up to speed with your son's application status for that open position in the sales department," replied Patricia.

Janet promptly sat up in her chair. This was a phone call from HR that she had hoped to receive for the past two weeks. Her son, whom she had referred, was a finalist for a rarely vacant sales position in the firm. She had made a personal call to the V.P. of sales to garner favor for her son, Jon.

"Jon is now one of two finalists. That's the good news. But we have a problem."

"What's the problem," said Janet.

"We ran a routine online check and we uncovered some troubling facts. Was Jon ever arrested for possession of illegal drugs?"

Janet felt a shiver run down her spine. She knew exactly what Patricia was referring to. Her son had been caught up in a drug investigation with a group of other young adults during a spring vacation while at a popular beach destination about four years earlier. Her son was cleared of all charges, but one of his supposed friends was subsequently charged with a felony. His (Jon's) association with this friend remained sketchy, as portrayed in local media files. Janet would spend the next hour explaining the past events of her son to Patricia, the director of HR.

Back at the outskirts of the city, John's meeting with his five Vice Presidents was underway. As the new President of a 400-person service division of a large out-of-state company, he had been hired to put the service division back on track and repair many problems plaguing the unit after the departure of the prior leader amid major controversy. Rumors had spread like wild fire across the entire division, with many employees not knowing what a new leader was coming to do. Would there be layoffs? Would key people be fired? Would the division be prepared for a sell-off to another buyer? These job security issues were high on most employees' minds.

The current topic under discussion was how to best communicate (initially) with all the employees and address all the speculation floating around. The Vice Presidents all seemed much relieved and re-energized after John alleviated their concerns and shared his plans with them—plans to refocus the division on a new vision; plans to heal old wounds from standing conflict; plans to explore ways to work smarter, be more efficient, better serve their customers; and plans to offer training and support to employees that need them.

The consensus advice from his Vice Presidents was for John to send out a carefully crafted memo via email to all employees—a message that would address key issues.

"Well, ladies, gentlemen, while I agree that an email message to all employees would be appropriate under normal circumstances, you will agree that these are not normal circumstances," said John to his team of VPs.

John stood up, walked away from the conference table in a corner of his office where they were all seated, took off his suit jacket, and unbuttoned and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

He returned to the conference table, took his seat, and said, "I will meet with your respective groups personally, one group at a time. We will plan one hour per group and sweep through all five groups. It will be an open discussion meeting. I will share much of our plans with them, answer all questions, and reassure them—face to face."

He promptly followed, "What do you think?"

His new team was somewhat shocked by this uncommon approach; but they liked it. They knew the employees would welcome these first-hand meetings, and they admired John for contemplating this move—something the previous President would never have considered.

As the team of VPs left to prepare their employees for the town hall-style meetings, John's cell phone rang. It was Janet.

"Hi dear."

"John, I just had a long conversation with our HR director. They were going to offer Jon the sales position, but they uncovered the stupid incident that he got into four years ago."

John interrupted her. "How did they find out?"

"The Internet, John, the Internet. Everything is online nowadays."

"Did you explain the situation and the facts?" said John

"I did the best I could, but Patricia will have to follow company procedures. I am not sure if they will give him the job. This mess that Jon got into is going to haunt him for a long time to come," said Janet with a very stressful tone.

"Have you called Jon?" said John

"No," replied Janet. "We will have to call him tonight and have a serious conversation with him."

"Alright dear, let's talk later. I have over 400 employees depending on me. What I do today may make a difference for years to come in the lives of these people and in my effort to forge a strong foundation of trust with them."

"You will be fine, you will be fine," said Janet, as she concluded the call.

On one hand, a young man's actions from years past have left a trail that has come back to haunt him, today and perhaps for years to come—thanks to the Internet. While

Jon's past unfortunate incident would ordinarily be left buried in the past, the availability and accessibility of public (and sometimes private) information has changed the balance of power.

On the other hand, another man's actions are about to define a new chapter in his career—for better or for worse. John's actions on his first day at his new place of work is sure to create an impression that will clearly be etched and remembered by 400 people, one way or another, for a long time to come—leaving a trail within this business community.

In my nephew's case, the vapor trail left by the high flying airplanes in the sky would always vanish soon after for good; however, in life some trails—left by our words, actions, and other deeds—remain for a long time indeed.

About the Author



Niyi Taiwo is the founder of EKTIMIS and the lead editor for the EKTIMIS eLibrary articles. He is the author of several books, including the EKTIMIS Top Ten Laws series. He is a continuous improvement expert with over 21 years of industry experience – operational, management and consulting. He holds an undergraduate degree from WPI and a master's degree from RPI. He is a certified Lean Expert and an ASQ-certified Six Sigma Black Belt.