

CEO TO CEO

Assisting business leaders as they navigate critical passages

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People often ask what industry I focus on. I don't. I tell them that many of the difficult challenges in business are the same regardless of the industry. One of the most critical aspects of being a successful CEO is leadership itself. In fact, leadership transcends business, and we need more leadership everywhere in our world. One of the highest responsibilities for CEOs (and all leaders) is to identify and encourage leadership wherever they find it. In my column this month you'll learn that three years ago I found incredible leadership hidden



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in a janitor. I am very sad that he was murdered last month just before Thanksgiving. You'll learn how I tried to encourage him, and some conclusions and lessons that I've drawn from this loss. —Rob

Encouraging Hidden Leaders

By Robert Sher

A tragic event occurred that I cannot get out of my mind. For me, writing helps process my thoughts, get them out of my head, and bring forth the lesson I need to learn. I'm hoping that if I write about the recent murder of Tom Cunningham, whom I knew and who influenced my kids and community, I'll be able to reduce the amount of time my mind is spending thinking about it all--including times when I really need to be sleeping.

Three years ago, I discovered a hidden leader, and encouraged him. Tom was 35 years old and I wrote a letter to Tom's bosses that made Tom feel *ten feet tall*. Tom was the janitor (officially the Head Custodian) of my kids' elementary school. My kids started coming home talking a lot about Tom, and finally I inquired about

Tom was, and why my kids were so excited about the janitor. I asked a few questions around the school and of my wife and discovered that while Tom was indeed the janitor, he was in truth, a hidden leader at the school, having perhaps more influence than the principal, teachers, the PTA or any of the formal leaders.

I was so impressed with Tom. What he was doing was outside the normal range of goodness: It was well beyond; it was Wow. I knew I had to [write him up](#). I had decided years ago to be on the lookout for people doing great things so I could write commendation letters to them. Julie Rathbone, a classmate, had written a powerful one in high school and it helped me to read it over and over again for a few years. I've been trying to return the favor to the world ever since. Typically, I write three or four per year. I should

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(Continued on page 2)

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write more.

My soft spot for letter writing is to people without exalted titles who act like leaders, and help lots of people live better lives. I'm calling them hidden leaders. So a good number of my letters recently seem to go to teachers, coaches, school administrators and the like. But I loved writing Tom Cunningham up because he was a janitor. A position that many, myself included, often use as the antithesis of achievement or leadership. How many parents tell their children that if they don't get good grades, they'll end up being the janitor? Yet here I was, in 2006 telling my kids that they should be like Tom, the janitor.

I'm really sad and disappointed that Tom's gone. He was out walking his dog with his 13 year old daughter in Hayward and was shot multiple times for no good reason. From what I know, Tom's dog sniffed the man, who may have been urinating on the street, and an argument ensued. My guess is that Tom was trying to keep his neighborhood clean. His daughter witnessed it all, ran for help, and was not physically harmed.

I'm struggling with resolving why this kind of senseless violence happens, and to such great people like Tom. I know it happens all the time, all over the world. But this time, it hit closer to home, as it cut short the life of a hidden leader that I knew; that I had encouraged. Still, I am so glad I made Tom feel *ten feet tall* when he was still alive, and he got to revel in my appreciation for him, and the appreciation of those that got the letter or heard about it. If you want to read the letter, [click here](#). It turned out to be one of my better ones. The letter is written to the su-

perintendent of the school district, with copies to the head custodian of the district, to the principal of the school, and I gave a copy to my kids to hand to Tom. I'm told Tom showed it to a number of teachers, the principal showed it around and Tom got some others teachers agreeing with the letter, adding to the recognition.

I hope my letter encouraged Tom to continue his leadership work. I don't know that, and can't claim any credit. He was already leading when I discovered him. But many people who do great things, who lead, often quietly, in their community don't get enough kudos for it. So many more people in the world whine, complain, pick out faults, and otherwise bring down people who are trying to lead. Murderers certainly do that with a horrible finality, but so do all of us when we criticize more than we compliment. Where we find fault but don't notice things worthy of credit.

I wrote the letter to be a powerful counterbalancing force so that on any day when Tom felt beaten down, drained of his positive energy, he could re-read my letter and be healed. I also wanted him, and those around him to really understand what Tom was doing -- he was not just a helpful, upbeat janitor, but instead, a community leader. I wanted to put a definition, a label for what he was, to have it scream out, so as to set an example for everyone around him. As though I got on the school PA system and yelled, "*Tom is a leader*".

There are leaders hidden everywhere. We CEOs have leader-like titles and are expected to lead. But I think leadership includes developing others into leaders. It includes supporting and serving hidden leaders; young leaders; old leaders. Calling out great acts of leadership by hidden leaders is just one way to do that.

(Continued on page 3)

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I'm a strong communicator, so I use those strengths to magnify the effect when I choose a target for a commendation. But anything—a verbal comment, a short note, an e-mail—anything that conveys encouragement goes a long way. **Please put your fingers to the keyboard and become a serial commendation communicator.**

I'll share one of my favorites I did often in my company as CEO. I'd catch someone in my company showing initiative (leading in some way)—and the more levels below me on the organization chart, the better. I would pick up my phone and page them to my office. The factory loudspeakers would blare with my voice. Every phone with a speaker carried my voice. So everybody in the company heard that, say, a warehouse worker had been called to the CEO's office. Some of these people had never even been in my office. They'd be really nervous, sometimes red in the face. Their peers would look at them with a bit of pity in their eyes, wondering what they'd done to get called to the CEO's office. Insincere but well meaning comments like "It'll be fine" were made to them as they walked through the facility to their imagined doom.

They'd appear in my door; I'd be smiling. I'd gesture for them to sit down, but then I'd close the door. Next came a five minute tirade about how impressed I was with them, what their great work meant to me, to the company, and on and on. You could see them relax, then start to grow taller. Meanwhile, their peers were all distracted and chattering about the fact that my door was closed, about how long the door had been closed, about how the poor employee didn't deserve this, etc. As the "victim" emerged from my office they would be approached, over and over again with "What happened?", and the size of their pride would grow with each telling. They'd walk out of my office 8 feet tall, and end up feeling *ten feet tall*. What fun for me. I was never a yelling sort of CEO, and there was no good reason for all the anxiety around "Rob's

office". My "catching someone doing something good" technique worked over and over again, creating suspense then relief and joy, even when they suspected that I was going to "do it again".

I am humbled by many people around me who help our world in ways much greater than I've ever been able to, or chosen to do. I know people that pour energy and time into many aspects of helping our world to be a better place, including leadership development. Most of you help our world quietly, and I don't even know what you do or how you contribute. Thank you anyway and please be encouraged.

Goodbye, Tom. Thank you for your leadership, and for your work to help kids to have a great example of leadership, right there in school.

I feel better now, having written what you've just read. It's time for me to stop thinking about Tom and what we've lost, and to get on with the mission. That mission is to encourage hidden leaders.

My mind is now beginning to focus on my next target for commendation -- a certain soccer coach. He got a letter last year from me, but he deserves more. I think I'll nail him with a speech at the end-of-the-season party. His kids are all grown up, but he still coaches teams of girls, declining to accept any pay. If you know who I am talking about, keep it secret. I want to take this hidden leader by surprise, the better to get him feeling *ten feet tall*.

*Robert Sher is principal of CEO to CEO, specializing in assisting CEOs and business leaders as they navigate critical passages. He is the author of *The Feel of the Deal; How I Built a Business through Acquisitions*. He may be reached at Robert@ceotoceo.biz.*