

One Unforgettable Hour

It's such a deceptively simple word. Thirteen letters that spell out an irresistible "can't-miss" truth that eludes the most principled, well-meaning CEO and manager. Every person I know, every employee you care about, hungers for it:

Encouragement!

The more I listen to ministry leaders, the more I study Scripture, the more I'm convinced that encouragement is at the heart of true leadership and wise, prudent management. I believe the simplest encouraging words can, in fact, empower people to achieve incredible (even unimaginable) things – especially the talented, gifted people in your ministry who are on the brink of something great and don't even know it.

In 1999, I was vice president of programs for Prison Fellowship, responsible for reaching prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families with the Gospel. At the top of my to-do list was Angel Tree; Prison Fellowship partnered with local churches, so the children of prisoners could receive a gift "in the name of the father."

After many years of steady growth, this effective outreach had stalled at around 480,000 children. My task was to re-engineer Angel Tree and help it grow.

Before coming to Prison Fellowship, I'd managed a small restaurant chain in New York. I had built and sold a successful lock company. I approached the Angel Tree assignment having served five years as executive director of Prison Fellowship International.

I had every reason to be confident. Yet, as I stepped into my new senior VP position, my ideas and strategic initiatives ran up against realities. I was told there wasn't enough money. I was told to re-think this, and put the brakes on that. I was reminded that calculated risks could be dangerous to the organization. Rather than any immediate encouragement, I saw nothing but caution signals. I began to second-guess myself. Insecurity became an uninvited guest that told me to move over, and self-doubt began to steer my course.

Yet, one person made the difference. For one hour a week, I sat down with the most significant person I've ever encountered in my working life. I remember the first time I met him. When Tom Pratt, president of Prison Fellowship, shook my hand, I felt an iron grip of integrity. He looked me straight in the eye and didn't mince words. "Frank, I've heard all about you. Sit down. Let's talk."

Tom had been a long-time senior executive and board

member for Herman Miller, the legendary office furniture company. When Chuck Colson needed a president for Prison Fellowship, he wanted a strong leader, solid in character, anchored in faith – in essence, Tom Pratt.

Almost immediately, I knew this man was special. Have you ever met someone who put aside every possible distraction and gave you total attention? That was Tom. His interest in my work, his eagerness to learn more about my goals, hopes and challenges made me feel that I was the most important person in the world. His genuine concern caused me to relax, and open up.

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Tom was an incredible listener, a skill eclipsed only by an even more abundant God-given treasure: the gift of encouragement.

To me, the task of re-inventing Angel Tree was daunting. There were too few resources for any significant turnaround, and too much pressure. Tom listened and then told me things I hadn't heard, much less believed: "Frank, we can do this. Don't be afraid to take risks. God is with us. Believe it. The Lord has put in you in Prison Fellowship for a reason. He's given you tremendous abilities."

Tom's words gave me new confidence, motivation and drive. By the time our hour was up, I couldn't wait to get back to my office. This wasn't about self-help, but rather a leader taking a few minutes each week to remind me of the work the Lord had

put before Prison Fellowship, and that I was part of that unfolding plan. Tom's encouragement moved me to take the calculated risks I needed to move forward.

Over the next year, with the help of many, many people, the work of Angel Tree improved both in quality and quantity. And many more children of inmates received gifts and the life-changing message that, in Christ, they could know the Father's love.

Surely, there are people on your team who need the encouraging words that can silence self-doubt, restore their confidence and renew their passion for the Lord? Can you – can I – do any less for the people in our organizations whom the Lord has called us to serve, empower and encourage?

Frank Lofaro welcomes all CMA members and associates to email him at Frank@CMAonline.org. He's eager to hear from you.



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