TechHumans Blog

Exploring the Human Side of Technical Work

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We Humans

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[This is a transcript of a lightning talk I gave at RubyConf India and RubyConf Philippines in 2016.]

The human condition is one of contradictions.

We enjoy and celebrate the successes of science and technology. We honor acts of selflessness, goodness, and courage.

And yet, unfortunately, we human beings also see behavior in each other that appears to spring from a being without a brain, or a heart, or sometimes both.

How much worse when we find that we ourselves have displayed insensitivity, arrogance, or malice.

One of the highest forms of nobility we as humans have is the willingness to acknowledge our imperfections and work to change them. We do this for others, and for ourselves.

So much of our waking time is spent working. And so much of our happiness during that working time depends on our working relationships.

The times when I have worked on teams that have a culture of friendliness and helpfulness have been my happiest ones. Working in toxic environments where nastiness was tolerated and practiced were my most miserable ones.

There's something I call radical helpfulness. I mean by this thinking outside the box…extending yourself beyond your comfort zone and/or beyond the realm of your responsibility, to be helpful. I talk about it more in another article on Medium here.

Since I want to be treated well, I need to do everything I can to model the kind of treatment I want to receive.

Here are some questions I ask myself, in the spirit of radical helpfulness, that may be helpful to you as well.

- Is there anything I can do to help my coworker be more productive or happy?
- Do my coworkers feel valued and heard? If not, can I try to change that? If I can't do that, can I at least offer a sympathetic ear?
- When I "catch someone doing good", how can I most effectively acknowledge it, even if it's not my position to do so? Such as… "Hey, Brad, I asked for that feature just an hour ago and you already got it for me. That's amazing! Thank you!"

Here are some examples of my attempts at radical helpfulness.

1) I once attended a meeting where two coworkers were discussing a new software module. They spoke and spoke, and when anyone else tried to speak they cut them off. Finally I couldn't take it any longer and said "you know, we've been listening to you guys talk for over a half hour. X and Y haven't said anything until now, and now when they did, you cut them off. I'd like to hear what they have to say." To their credit, when this was pointed out to them they realized what they had done and corrected it immediately. Think about how X and Y felt. Have you ever felt that way? Or ever made someone else feel that way?

2) There was one time at work many years ago when two of my coworkers were yelling at each other. I stepped up to them and asked "would a third party be helpful here?". They each told me their grievances and we defused the situation.

3) Another time, there was a guy who was being let go from our company. There was a rumor that he had done something quite inappropriate, but not something that had caused anyone physical or emotional harm. He was being shunned by everyone. I felt bad for him. I wanted him to know that I acknowledged his value as a person, and we talked from time to time. He was an interesting guy, very curious and inventive. We were talking on the phone once after he left the company, and he told me he had been experimenting with explosives at his rural home. Nothing ever happened. But if no one had ever connected with him, would it have?

We need to cultivate in our minds a radical helpfulness bot that's always watching our lives and asking us 'what can you do to make this better?' at opportune times.

How wonderful that we [Rubyists] work in a community where MINSWAN ("Matz (Yukihiro Matsumoto, principal author of Ruby) Is Nice So We Are Nice") is a guiding principle; but we are just a microcosm of the world.

When our human species is studied by future species, what will they see? Will they see an animal implementation of the weed, who overtook the planet on which it lived to the point of making it uninhabitable? Or will they see a noble species who worked really hard to overcome their default modes of thinking to save, nurture, and support each other, and the other beings with whom they shared this planet?

The answer to that, my friends, is up to us.

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