

Introduction: Imagine . . . Being Able

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Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

LIKE IN THE ARMY, a business must have followers and leaders: generals, sergeants, and enlisted men and women. Dress codes should fit each group, and each group should associate primarily with their peers. This helps keep order; each person clearly understands their place and role in the organization.

I was told this over and over by friends and family. The way I was guiding Habitat would end in failure. We would fail if we did not conform.

My answer was, “Watch us.”

Being a rebel has always been part of my nature. Even as a young boy I was rebellious; I knew what I wanted and would not be satisfied with anything less. This frustrated my parents. Shopping was always a major ordeal. It took me so long to find “the one” toy or game or pair of shoes I wanted that by that point price didn’t matter to my parents. They just wanted to finish shopping. But the time was worth it to me.

My schooling was also frustrating for my parents. I was not a good student. I felt the teachers were teaching the wrong things. Yes, I needed to know that one and one make two, and I needed science and spelling to advance in my studies, but I felt like something was missing.

My teachers were not teaching me about being a person—about compassion, and working together with others, not just how to become a Harvard MBA who understood numbers without knowing how to deal with other people.

I have been blessed with many great teachers, both good and bad. An ancient saying goes, “We have no friends, no enemies, we only have teachers.” But my father was my greatest teacher. He raised me to open my heart to all people regardless of race, color, religion, or disability. He taught me that all people suffer much of the same pain and sorrows while also receiving the same joys life has to offer. He said often that we are all the same.

This is the mindset I brought with me when I started at Habitat.

After I dropped out of college, I had many jobs, mainly with friends and family, but none let me experience the purpose and passion I was hungry for. The conventional approach to doing business is just plain boring. When I started at Habitat, doing things the conventional way didn’t even enter my mind. And the more people, especially family, told me I would never succeed with my “hippie” dreams and ideals, the more I wanted to show them that you can be independent and do things your own way and still succeed.

It was 1981, and I was 26 years old. And because I was young and rebellious, and not willing to accept the “no”s, “never”s, and “can’t”s, I was able to do what others wouldn’t even try: welcome people with disabilities into our workforce. And by doing so, we not only grew as a business, but as people, too.

At the beginning, while the future was unknown and we had no real plan, we were certain about one thing: we would not build a factory with plain walls. We wanted to let the light in, both literally and figuratively, and make our workplace a cheerful one. Little did we imagine, however, that someday we would have a factory with floor-to-ceiling art and murals, gardens and fish ponds, stone and steel sculptures and music everywhere. For birthdays and numerous other occasions, one of our traditions at Habitat is to sit in a circle and beat on drums, shakers, and makeshift instruments, sometimes rhythmically, together, but most of the time in unorganized joy. Dancing and uniting to this beat brings out the best in all of us. Both of these practices—our unconventional décor and our unconventional celebration—are ways of bringing joy into our workplace . . . and of being ourselves. The world would be an even more beautiful place if we could be ourselves more often, just take off the masks that we have

been wearing for so long. Society demands that we look and dress a certain way, that we act and perform in a particular fashion. By taking off these masks we also open our hearts and minds.

Almost from the onset, state and federal organizations and even private groups got in our way, demanding adherence to myriad rules and regulations that governed the employment of people with disabilities. The bureaucracies seemed to be more interested in numbers and dollars than in recognizing the hard-won, step-by-step personal growth and successes of our eager employees. At times we fought the system so hard that we began to lose sight of the needs of the people we were actually fighting for. We wasted plenty of precious time. But looking back, I can see these experiences, both positive and negative, as valuable lessons that led to growth, wisdom, and knowledge.

Solutions for Habitat's management became clear. When possible, we needed to break with intermediaries and work directly with the individuals involved, and their families and/or caregivers. Our frustration at obstacles was replaced with exhilaration at our successes and determination to work harder and do more. It was evident to us, at least, that human beings who historically had been relegated to institutions could become productive citizens of their community. It was also evident that there was no need to "fix" people or the workplace; neither was broken. A segregated work setting created far more obstacles than it removed.

As the years flew by we hired more people who were intellectually and physically challenged, and who had mental health issues. Then came people with substance abuse problems, brain injuries, cerebral palsy, sensory deficits, autism, and on and on. We offered them and their families both genuine caring and a real chance. My father and I, along with our office personnel, stood back and watched with amazement as one able worker after another prevailed over disability and infirmity. Some learned to live independently and drive a car, and some even began attending school. And we learned to open our eyes to see people with disabilities as "people first." We may have played a role in unshackling a few of society's disadvantaged and downtrodden here at Habitat, but those "disadvantaged and downtrodden" have unshackled us too—unshackled our hearts.

While I grew up believing that any sort of prejudice toward anyone was the ultimate sin, I must admit I have become very "prejudiced" toward people with Down syndrome. They have become my ultimate teachers. While everyone has a gift, I feel their gifts in most cases are

their incredible hearts. What they may be lacking in brain power, they make up for with their pure hearts.

One day while listening to our staff sadly discuss the recent passing of one of our favorite team members, I couldn't help but feel that they understood so much better than many of us how important life is from the time we are born until the moment we die. As I listened they saw sadness in me. One young man turned to me and asked the most heartfelt question that anyone has ever asked me: "How's your heart today?" Not "How are you?", for which I could have come up with numerous trivial answers—"Work is okay," "I am tired," "I am upset with my family"—but "How's your heart?" This moment and numerous others like it that I experience every day at work grounds me, awakens me to what's really important, and helps me on my path to being more human. As Stephen Hopkins said, referring to his cerebral palsy, when signing the Declaration of Independence, "My hands tremble but my heart does not." Our employees' hearts are steady, and teach ours to be as well.

At Habitat we are very open and proud about who we are and about our distractions. And so it has been the so-called "normal" among us that have had to look into ourselves and work to become more *able* in our thoughts and actions. I am told almost every day by our team members not only that they are *able*, but that the biggest disability they have is you and I. By doing the right thing in our thoughts and actions, by giving all people hope and a chance for change, the only thing we have to lose is our own disability: fear.

There have been many highs and lows for me at Habitat; there has been comedy, drama, tragedy, and everything in-between. But knowing who we are working for (each other) and what we can accomplish together as a team and a family make it all worthwhile. Many may question our unorthodox way of doing business, our unconventional building and our unconventional people, but we cannot and will not (out comes the rebel again) please everyone. We only need to answer to ourselves, our team members, and their families and caregivers. It is a huge advantage being a for-profit business. Our goals and mission statement don't change according to grants or funding, so we are able to make changes as needed for what we hope will be the good of each individual and of the group.

Since I began this journey with the rest of the Habitat family, I've been asked to sit on several boards of directors. I am usually very reluctant to

agree because in most cases board members are simply bodies warming chairs. Change is hard and uncomfortable, especially in the disability movement where many service providers/non-profits and their boards have lost their true paths and become more concerned with money than with people. Some of the boards I have served on have opened my eyes to how much bureaucracy there can be, and how some organizations place “yes men” or friends on the board for self-serving reasons. Even with these eye opening experiences, however, I have met some incredible warriors (peaceful and mindful) that are carving their own paths in helping mankind. We are fortunate that several of them have chosen to be part of this book. I am very grateful to my friends Randy Lewis, George Kessinger, Dr. Rick Rader, Carol Glazer, and Charley Dey, along with so many others, including Jim Thomison, for expressing their feelings and thoughts in this second edition.

There are a few other people I'd like to take a moment to thank. First and foremost is my father, Saul, who passed away before *Able!* was published. My father was a dreamer. He gave me opportunities even when he felt my ideas were risky or even a little bit crazy, and I was blessed to have him beside me, believing in me. He was very pleased that Habitat was featured in so many magazines, newspapers, and television specials, but wanted us in what he referred to as a “real business publication”: his business bibles were *The Wall Street Journal*, *INC*, and *Business Week*. Now we've been in both *The Wall Street Journal* and *INC*. I know he is looking down, smiling, and still dreaming.

All of us who make up the Habitat team were thrilled and honored when Nancy Henderson, after years of writing inspirational stories about us for national newspapers and magazines, wanted to author her first book about our company. Thanks to Nancy for writing from her heart while changing our lives and so many others throughout the country.

Also, to all the friends who have taken this journey with us, we thank you for your ongoing love and support and being a vital part of the Habitat family. May you carry on my father Saul's legacy of compassion, as you help and inspire those around you.