



CHIEF  
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BURNISON**



## Changing the Conversation

**I**t happened recently when I went to the grocery store. Stopping in the restroom to wash my hands, I looked up from the sink to see the door swing open and a young man walk in, wearing a butcher's apron—and carrying a phone in his hand.

He headed to the far sink in the corner, propped the phone against the mirror and kept talking, concentrating on whoever was on the screen.

Glancing over, he gestured to me as if to ask, “This okay with you?”

Then he continued with what was clearly a group counseling session—given the number of voices on the phone and a professional asking specific questions around changing behavior and being honest about feelings.

As surreal as the surroundings were, it also struck me as oddly refreshing. Nothing was hidden—everything in this conversation was out in the open.

When I reached for the door handle to leave, my emotions got the best of me. I gave the young man a thumbs up as if to say, “I see you.”

Those words in that moment took me back a few decades, to another time and place.

Back then, I was a recent college graduate and had scraped together the money for a plane ticket to pay a surprise visit to my dad. But when I arrived, I was met with a locked door. I could hear the TV inside, but the place was dark.

When I found the apartment manager and explained who I was, he let me in. I found Dad

passed out on the floor—surrounded by empty bottles and complete disarray.

Not knowing what else to do, I put Dad to bed and spent the night on the sofa. In the morning, amid the stench and strewn debris, I simply said, “We’ve hit rock bottom—something has to change.”

What came next was a courageous, tearful conversation revealing the secret Dad had struggled with for years. He admitted the truth and joined a 12-step program—I even had the privilege of going to a few sessions. Eventually, through a lot of self-reflection and help from others, there were more blue skies than gray clouds in the years that followed.

Two stories. One door flung open, one closed for too long—and both a reminder that no one can get out of a locked room by themselves.

That’s why the conversation needs to



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change. This is not solely about performance and productivity—it’s about people and propelling ourselves forward. Here are some thoughts:

**ASKING FOR—AND GIVING—HELP.** Too often, people hesitate to raise their hand for help, and that includes leaders. There’s a risk/reward involved, and we think we can’t appear to have faults, frailties, and insecurities in front of others. But here’s the thing: No one is infallible—we all need help.

**IT’S WHERE WE THRIVE.** At times, it’s easy for anyone to feel isolated, especially in this workscape that hasn’t quite figured itself out. This uncertainty—not to mention world events—can be unsettling. We all need a supportive ecosystem, and to be surrounded by others. We knew this intuitively

in kindergarten when, yes, it was about our ABCs—but even more than those skills, it was about socialization.

**LIVING IN THE REAL WORLD.** This brings us to the role of the leader. The more authentic, approachable, and vulnerable we are, the more we can mirror how to create a connected community where we are each part of something bigger than ourselves. This is not about reverting to the old world of corner-office mentality, near-capacity office space, and up-and-down org charts. And it isn’t even about just embracing the new world. This is about living and leading in the real world.

So, if a colleague needs to talk ... *listen*. When someone you know needs help ... *act*. If you feel that you don’t have all the answers ... *ask*. And when you are the one in need ... *open the door*. ▀