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Our Five Graces

Like truth, art, or love, grace is often hard to define. But we know it when we see it, and when we experience it—and these days it’s more important than ever. I’ll never forget—it was early in my days as a CEO. A member of our board, who was mentoring me, looked me in the eye and said, “I don’t just want you to be successful—I am going to ensure that you are successful.”

Looking back now, I see that as a gift of grace. Unearned and unmerited, grace is the goodwill of human nature predisposed to helping others.

As we all strive to become our better selves, we can find inspiration in the five graces—gratitude, resilience, aspiration, courage, and empathy. Each captures an invaluable human trait, and together they literally compose the word “grace.”

GRATITUDE

On the corner of my home office desk is a scrapbook: a celebration of the past 50 years of our firm. Whenever I need perspective, I turn to those pages and see the mosaic of colleagues past and present—the heart and soul of our firm. We’ve congratulated each other on weddings and the births of children, we’ve comforted each other in times of illness, and we’ve expressed condolences on the loss of loved ones. Because when family and friends are deeply connected, that’s what they do. And for this we are grateful.

RESILIENCE

I’ll never forget the story shared with me by an executive about his mother, who, when she was in her late 90s, contracted a serious

infection that required hospitalization. As her condition worsened, the doctors told the family she wasn’t going to make it. Thinking that his mother was sleeping, the executive quietly approached the hospital bed and called out gently to her. Suddenly, she snapped her eyes open and replied in a heavy Italian accent, “I heard what you and the doctors were talking about. I am not going anywhere.” Ever resilient, she lived another two years—nearly reaching 100 years of age! These stories have a lasting impact, reminding us to never underestimate the indomitable human spirit.

ASPIRATION

Hope, desire, longing, yearning, wish, aim... Each of these words speaks to an aspect of aspiration, but it is far more than all of them. Aspiration has nothing to do with momentary wants—the kind of dreams that captured us as children. It is far more than a passing fad or fancy. Aspiration is a vision—a goal—capturing no less than who we are and what we want to become.

COURAGE

During times of rapid change, we’re in constant transition—like trapeze artists flying through the air. We can’t make the next trapeze appear automatically—we must wait for it. Then we let go of the old trapeze so we can reach for the new one. In that moment—completely ungrounded—we need courage. Courage is not about having “no fear,” but rather to “know fear.” By following our values



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and drawing from past experiences, we find a way forward—“knowing what to do when we don’t know what to do.”

EMPATHY

We see people for who they really are, as we meet them wherever they are. This is the power of empathy, as our Korn Ferry Institute explains. Cognitive empathy allows us to understand others’ emotional experiences while maintaining a healthy detachment. Sympathy—or emotional empathy—allows

us to feel what another person is experiencing. Too much sympathy, though, can make us feel pain as if it were our own, and we become prone to putting up barriers. But with compassion, or empathetic care, we experience concern that allows us to reach out to help.

Life and leadership are all about the journey and the grace-filled moments along the way. That’s what people remember the most. After all, grace is not defined by what we say; rather, it is found in what others feel. ▀