

# ***LeaderPerfect Newsletter***

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## **A Leadership Lesson from the Thanksgiving Table**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

Thanksgiving Day is upon us. On the surface, Thanksgiving seems to have little connection with leadership. But the day exemplifies a profound principle that leaders frequently overlook.

Before I get to this principle, let me ask some questions about your family and its celebration of Thanksgiving.

First, how important is Thanksgiving Day in your family? Research consistently indicates that most people consider Thanksgiving the most important holiday of the year for the family as a whole. That's why the airlines are busiest around Thanksgiving. Everyone is trying to join family for the day.

Second, how does your family celebrate Thanksgiving?

- Do you tend to gather at the same place every year? Or does the dinner move from household to household?
- Does the clan huddle around the TV for a significant part of the day? Or is something else your television fare?
- If hours of TV are indeed on the venue, do you primarily watch football games? Or Christmas parades from New York and Pasadena?
- Do you have a big meal, a genuine feast? Or do you settle for simpler fare?
- And what about the dinner itself? Are the items on the menu fundamentally the same every Thanksgiving season?

Now, you may be saying that none of these things apply to your family, because you use Thanksgiving for a mini-vacation. Perhaps your family heads to the Rockies over Thanksgiving to enjoy an early winter round of skiing.

Then let me ask this:

- If yours is a vacationing Thanksgiving, does your family tend to go to the same place and follow a similar schedule every Thanksgiving season? Or do you pick a different place to go each year?
- And what about the routine? Is it basically the same each year, with the same people and with the same pattern of activities? Or is variety the primary spice in your Thanksgiving festivities?

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If you are like most people, your family has a rather set routine for Thanksgiving. For some families the routine is more traditional. For others it's a complete break with the Norman Rockwell vision of Thanksgiving Day.

## Thanksgiving Rituals

Whatever the Thanksgiving routine, most families do have one. (Even going on vacation every Thanksgiving is a routine.) And it is more than a routine. It borders on being a ritual. It's what makes Thanksgiving Thanksgiving in your family. If certain elements of the routine are missing or if certain people are not present, it just doesn't seem like Thanksgiving Day.

Our Thanksgiving rituals are not so formalized as those that you might see in a cathedral. But they are rituals nonetheless. They knit the clan together spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally, as rituals have always done.

And I use the word "clan" purposefully. The term has a certain tribal connotation to it. Thanksgiving routines renew a tribe-like bond within the family.

The uniting power of rituals makes them vital to families, tribes, and clans. One reason that military traditions are so rich in ritual is to create the heartfelt sense that "we are truly a band of brothers."

## Corporate Rituals

As in families, rituals in corporate settings center on patterns of activity that attend moments charged with value for employees or volunteers, either individually or as a group. These value-charged moments may include such things as:

- how we celebrate career milestones for people in our group
- community service projects that we undertake together
- the way that we stage get-togethers for holiday seasons
- how we conduct annual or periodic meetings of the entire group
- the things that we do to celebrate completion of major projects or initiatives

Now, it's vital to keep in mind that rituals don't become rituals until they have been repeated enough times to be part of the cultural fabric. None of your family's Thanksgiving traditions became a tradition until they recurred repeatedly. Only when traditions are fully woven into the cultural fabric do they have the potential bonding power of ritual.

In most families, one or two people (almost invariably women) have taken on the role of assuring that the family's Thanksgiving traditions are sustained year by year. Without someone guarding and preserving them, traditions steadily fade away.

In organizational life, leadership has to be equally purposeful about building cultural traditions and then maintaining them. Otherwise we may continue to talk about our organization being a family, but odds are that it won't feel like one.

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