

## **Idealism at Work at Work**

Have you heard, do you remember the story of the little girl on a beach littered with thousands of starfish, throwing them back in the ocean? When asked by her grandfather what she was doing, she explained she was saving the starfish thrown on the beach by last night's storm. The grandfather seeing the thousands of starfish tried to tell her it was futile as there were so many and she should save her energy; she could not make a difference in the lives of all those starfish. The little girl thought for a moment and then returned to picking up the starfish and throwing them back into the ocean. When the grandfather again told her she could not make a difference, she told him she had made a difference to the starfish she had returned to the ocean. The grandfather began to protest again and then hesitated. Then he picked up a starfish and returned it to the ocean. Soon others asked what they were doing and joined in and then still others. Shortly, all the starfish had been returned to the ocean.

In many ways the story is a metaphor for living a life of idealism. The little girl cares about what is meaningful, life. She imagines a greater good than allowing the starfish to dry up and die on the beach. Under prodding by her grandfather she tempers her vision to what she can do, save this starfish and then the next and the next. She may not be able to save all lives, correct all wrongs, but she can save this one; she can make a difference to the one in front of her.

As idealists do, the little girl wants to make a difference. She has faith in the power of change, trust that her vision of saving this starfish can be done. The starfish do not have to remain on the beach. She perseveres against the advice of her grandfather, a significant person in her young life. Against the odds of saving all, she presses on saving one at a time.

She acts with the assumption that each starfish is special, is deserving of an effort to keep it alive. In her unspoken trust that she can make a difference, even if not to all, she continued, and her example drew her grandfather into the action. Together they attracted others. So, in reality, must those who look and work for light and hope instead of cynicism and despair. The little girl did as Mahatma Gandhi advised, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," and attracted others to help.

If you are willing to allow love, hope, truth, justice, and humility to be the directive forces and the measures of success in your life, you are ripe for idealism in your life. At work, however you define it and wherever you do it, focus on what is good and beautiful in others. Seek to help the person in front of you to be a better person, to have a more "prosperous" life.

If the potential or need for change is so great that you think it near impossible, temper your vision with prudence, honesty, discretion, and humility; but do not give it up. The little girl changed her vision from saving all the starfish to saving the one in front of her and ended up saving all.

Robert Kennedy, in 1966, told students at the University of Cape Town in the apartheid Republic of South Africa, "Few still have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of the events, and in the total of all these acts will be written the history of this generation..." Nearly 30 years later, apartheid was ended.

## **Idealism — A Faith Based Value at Work**

1. What does applying the faith-based value of idealism in your workplace mean to you? What do you think it would mean to those with whom you work? How does its meaning change for your different workplaces, for example, home or where you volunteer?
2. Why is it important to gain an understanding of idealism in the workplace and how to apply that understanding?
3. What small portion of the events in your workplace will you work to change?
4. What would happen in your workplace if you took and actively applied the value of faith-based idealism in your workplace(s)? How would the workplace sound different? Look different? Feel different?
5. What first step are you willing to take this week?