

ALTRUISM: THE FIFTH FACTOR

*Life is never made unbearable by circumstances,
but only by lack of meaning and purpose.*

– Victor Frankl

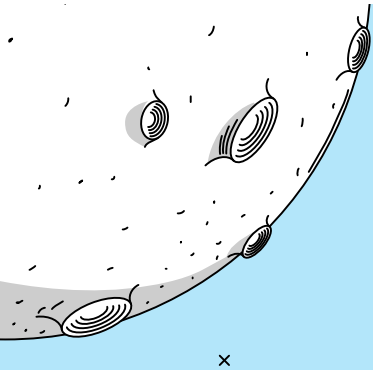
- ▲ Honor others, their time and contribution
- ▲ Be open to others' ideas, expect contribution from anywhere in the organization
- ▲ Connect to a greater purpose for higher performance



It was exciting to be among the first to tour the new facilities at NASA, now known as the Johnson Space Center. In the autumn of 1963, the space race was in full cry, and everyone in the US was flush from the success of John Glenn's three orbits around the earth the prior year. After we completed the tour of the control room and all the facilities, we waited out in front for our ride to pick us up. When a groundskeeper went by, one of the folks in the group asked him what he did. He turned and, visibly straightening himself, said, "I'm putting a man on the moon!"

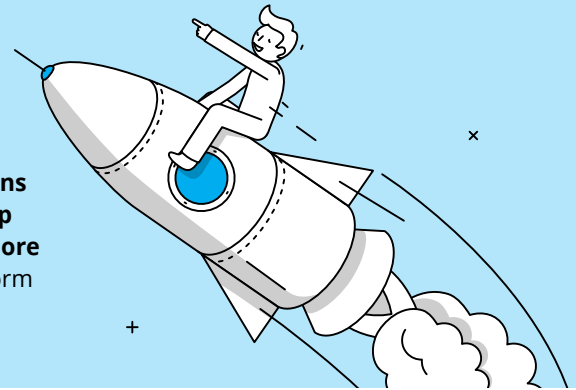
In our previous stories, we have covered four of the five factors affecting an organization's culture: **Efficacy, Goals, Approach and Relationships**. As we have seen, we have moved from task-based behaviors toward people-based ones. The final factor, Altruism, is the most focused on the behaviors of interaction with others.

As with the other major factors, there are key behaviors that contribute to **Altruism: Gratefulness, Purpose and Humility**. Three different vignettes illustrate these behaviors.



Purpose

The story above showcases Purpose. Just as the groundskeeper at NASA was excited about helping put a man on the moon, people seek to be associated with something that is greater than themselves. **Organizations that accurately define their greater purpose and help their members connect to it find those employees more highly engaged.** As a result, they will routinely outperform enterprises that do not define and connect.



Gratefulness

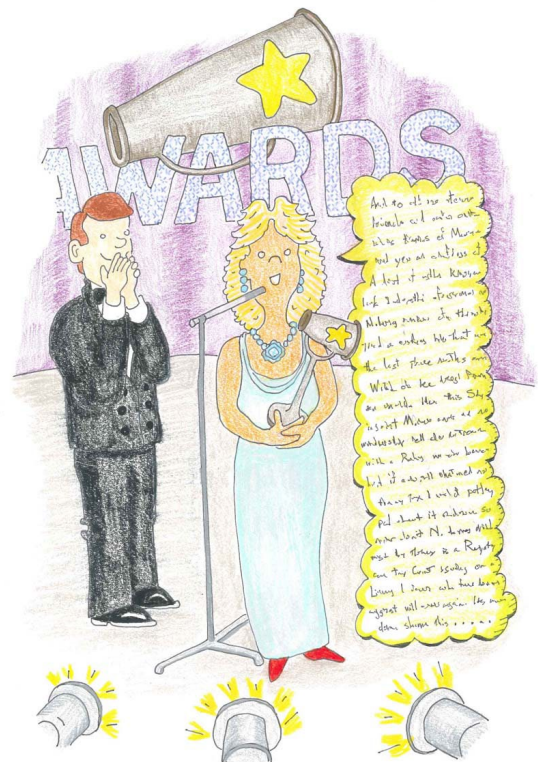
The air buzzed with the excited murmur of voices as we finally opened school in September 1999. It had been a long road. Five years before, we had begun an improbable journey from the basement of a downtown church with barely a yard for preschoolers to play in to a 25,000 square foot facility of our own on three acres of land on what was then the outskirts of town. On the evening of the first day of school, the parents, faculty and board members gathered in the multi-purpose room to celebrate our newly constructed pre-K through eighth grade Montessori facility.

As Chairman of the Board of Trustees, I stepped up to the podium and greeted everyone. **It had been a tough slog getting the project completed. In the moment, I was overcome with emotion. All I could think to say was, "We did it!"** The assembly applauded; I followed with some blandishments, and we continued the evening with tours of the classrooms and a true "housewarming."

It took a few days before word got back to me that one of the board members was very upset with what I had said that evening. Actually, she was unhappy with what I didn't say. Although I had been completely aware of the hard work all involved had put in, I failed to recognize everyone's contributions at the assembly, particularly this person for all her efforts building the school. And she was right. I could have been more specific in sharing the work others did.

Good organizations are collaborative. Even though employees are sometimes referred to as "Individual Contributors," very few work activities are solo experiences. **In the service of Gratefulness, team members need to respect other people's time as well as appreciate and recognize their investment in the success of any undertaking.**

Now I understand why all those award acceptance speeches are so long!



Humility

In the 1940's, Dr. Alfred Blaylock was an esteemed member of the faculty at Johns Hopkins Medical School and Chief of Surgery at its world-renowned Hospital. It was there that he pioneered open heart surgery through his work with cyanotic infants, known as "Blue Babies." These children had a heart defect that in virtually all cases was fatal. Dr. Blaylock needed to invent new procedures and develop new equipment to perform the incredibly delicate work required to repair these babies' hearts, enabling them to live.

The specialized equipment he needed was invented by Vivien Thomas, a man who started his career during the Depression working for Dr. Blaylock as a janitor at Vanderbilt. **He worked as Blaylock's research partner for years, designing and creating the key instruments and pioneering the revolutionary processes that led to Blaylock's bypass surgery that transformed cardiology worldwide.**

As anyone who is acquainted with the story knows, Vivien Thomas was black.

In the Jim Crow era in Baltimore, a White surgeon working on a collegial/peer basis with an African American was a non-starter.

Nevertheless, Blaylock overrode everyone's objections and insisted that Thomas be furnished with a specialized work laboratory close by so that they could collaborate daily. And because he listened to someone whom others had marginalized, our world is markedly better today.

Organizations that display humility know that knowledge can come from anywhere within the group. That means that their members are open-minded, listening closely to ideas that differ from their own. **As a result, they avoid becoming too entrenched in their own point of view, focusing less on being right and striving for the best solution instead. Humility leads to insight; insight leads to innovation.**

Altruism is a vital factor in an organization's culture. It completes the spectrum of behaviors needed for an organization to thrive in today's ever-changing, intensely disruptive and competitive world. At Level Three, we have been privileged to offer organizations and leaders the insights and guide the practical approaches needed to deliver high performance. We would be humbled to hear from you.

