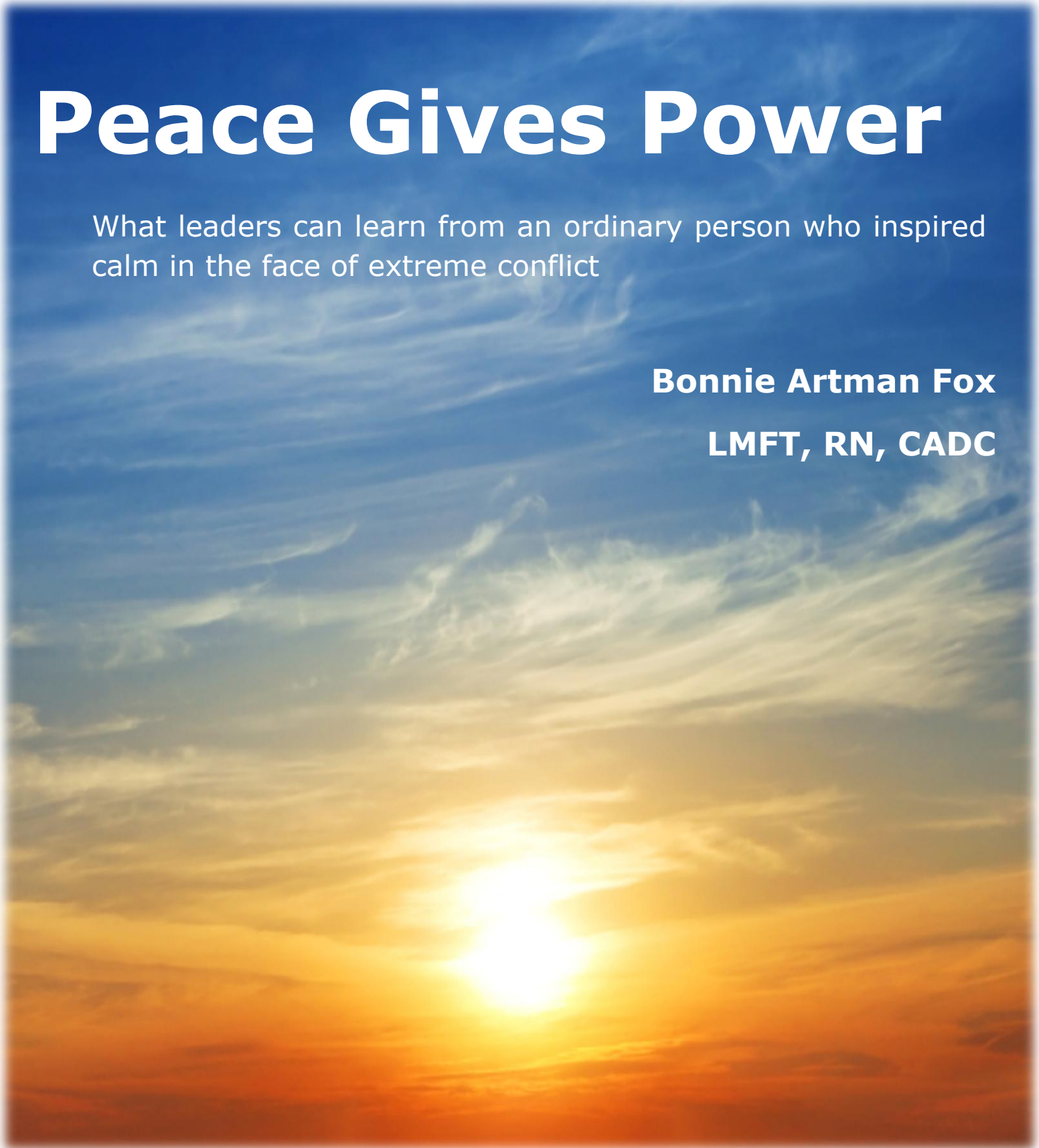


Peace Gives Power

What leaders can learn from an ordinary person who inspired calm in the face of extreme conflict

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AN ORDINARY DAY FOR AN ORDINARY PERSON

It started out as a typical day for bookkeeper Antoinette Tuff at Ronald E. McNair Discovery Learning Academy Elementary School. Suddenly a gunman entered the school stating "*We are all going to die today.*"

During this unexpected moment of crisis, she had a choice to react with panic or to stay calm. Gratefully, she chose to stay calm and assured. How? By being grounded in peace at a time she needed to be during a real-life situation.

Even though that very morning, she contemplated how she would handle the multiple stressors in her personal life - the recent abandonment from her husband that had prompted a suicide attempt, financial hardship, and the responsibilities of her 22-year-old son with disabilities. Miss Tuff later admitted in a media interview, she was in the mindset of putting one foot in front of the other when in an instant, her focus changed. When she saw the killer eyes of the gunman, she knew this wasn't a joke.

Miss Tuff was frightened, as anyone would be. Yet, she spoke calmly to the gunman and took on the role of mediator between that gunman and the police, as she talked to the gunman and the 911 operator. Miss Tuff spoke to the gunman from a position of calm, demonstrating compassion. She called him "sweetheart" and told the gunman about her own struggles. Eventually, Miss Tuff was able to persuade the gunman to put down his weapon, empty his pockets, lie down, and surrender to police. She is credited with saving roughly 800 lives, most of them children.

Peace is a crucial position of power.

When you walk into work, you, too, may be facing many personal stressors much like Miss Tuff. Hopefully, you won't be facing a gunman. Yet, as a leader, you may be facing budgets that need to be met, demands from your superiors, and unhappy employees or customers.

Even though you, as a leader, are in a position of authority, you will not be fully effective if you don't have peace. More specifically, you will not have power if you don't have peace.

When your back is against the wall, if you are under the gun (figuratively) for productivity, sales, and results, are you able to have the same peace that Miss Tuff exuded? Despite whatever personal stressors shadow you, as you open your office door, are you able to:

- Bring a calm presence amidst chaos?
- Inspire two bickering co-workers to resolve their differences?
- Speak with ease, clarity, and reassurance to an angry customer?

Whether in a home or a workplace, where there is strife, conflict, or tension, peace will not be found. As a leader, it is your responsibility to be the one who models working out disagreements for the greater good. If you are at peace, you are powerful. Not only powerful, you are unstoppable when it comes to inspiring your team to bring out their best.

In this article, using Antoinette Tuff's peace as an example, we will address three deliberate choices leaders such as Miss Tuff make during a time of conflict that are foundational to a collaborative and harmonious workplace:

I. DELIBERATE CALMNESS

Even when you can't control *what* happens to you, you can choose *how* you respond. Especially when the unexpected happens, staying calm can be challenging because the natural tendency is to react. Staying calm gives you the ability to see the situation objectively; this allows you to focus on the facts instead of your interpretation of the facts. So often, adversarial situations escalate because most people don't take the time to stay present to what is happening and notice important details surrounding them.

Staying calm becomes imperative to avoid negative judgments that can poison a situation. While in a leadership position, it is essential to have astute assessment skills. It is quite another thing to act on your assessment before gathering all the facts. Deliberate calmness gives you the mental clarity and focus to quickly appraise the severity of the situation in order to avoid labeling a situation or person. Premature labeling could heighten the conflict and cause more harm.

TIPS FOR DELIBERATE CALMNESS:

1. Use your breathing to keep you grounded – Physiologically, when in a threatening situation, whether real or imagined, your brain sends off alarms that send you into either fight, flight, or freeze. By using your breathing to stay centered, it's like pressing the brake pedal on your car when it's going 100 mph.

2. Make time daily to Consciously Pause – Miss Tuff credits her daily reading of the Bible for her ability to stay calm and assured during the school crisis. In order to be ready for unexpected adversity or crisis, practice some type of daily meditation. According to research in brain science in order to stay calm under pressure, you need a regular routine of consciously pausing. The might involve the Bible, mindfulness meditation, or simply walking in nature. This practice gives replenishment to your nervous system and equips you to be prepared and ready for the times you face the unexpected.

3. Consider what you are grateful for - Numerous studies show that expressing gratitude decreases stress and increases optimism. By expressing gratitude directly to someone, we are likely to receive kindness and gratitude in return.

II. DELIBERATE CONVERSATION

From the very first encounter with the gunman, Miss Tuff acknowledged the Gunman and the severity of the situation. She engaged in conversation with him with a unique blend of respecting his wishes and reassurance while conveying he was in charge. When in reality, she was in charge.

People who lash out verbal threats, accusations, and other harsh words often are hurting on the inside. Though they may not seem like it, they struggle with a fear of being perceived as incompetent. In order to keep you at arm's length and hide their feelings of inadequacy, they use words as a weapon to intimidate and to get people to do what they want.

TIPS FOR DELIBERATE CONVERSATIONS:

1. Take a genuine interest in your employees – One of the key factors reported by engaged employees is that their immediate supervisor takes a personal interest in them. If you want your employees to go the extra mile for you, get to know them beyond what they can do for you or the organization. Care about each as a person.

2. Stay rational, reasonable, concerned, and helpful – Sourcing Miss Tuff's example, she did what the gunman told her to do from getting on the school intercom to tell students and teachers he was there to making the 911 call. She stayed rational by asking the gunman to come back in the office when the police were shooting at him. She even went so far as to say *"Bullets don't know no names. Those bullets gonna kill me and you. I need you to come back in here. It's gonna be you and me, and we will work this thing out together."* (Tuff, Guidepost, p. 48)

3. Listen carefully – Whether under day-to-day stress or literally at gunpoint, being able to listen and hear the other person is essential. More specifically, it's hearing not just the other person's words; it's hearing the emotion behind the words. By staying present, respectful, and focused, you can perceive the other person's emotional pain, such as Miss Tuff had long before the gunman surrendered. In a media interview, Miss Tuff shared how she remained calm and validated the gunman as he opened up about

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his mental illness, being off of his medication, and that he really didn't want to hurt anyone. *How many conflicts in your work environment could be avoided or diverted by taking the time to listen and hear what people were saying?*

III. DELIBERATE COMPASSION

The best way to have compassion is to remember, we are all human. Though it sounds cliché, we all have the same longing to know we matter, belong, and are cared about -regardless of a projected tough exterior. Remembering the humanity of people and seeing past their behavior to their desperation to be valued can literally be the difference between life and death.

Despite poor choices your staff, co-workers, and managers are making, how could you see them with eyes of compassion? When you treat others with compassion, they begin to see you as an ally instead of a threat.

TIPS FOR DELIBERATE COMPASSION:

- 1. Give genuine reassurance** – We all go through something in life that can create negative situations. Commend others for positive choices that are being made in difficult times.
- 2. See strengths instead of inappropriate behavior** – When in a conflictual situation, it's easy to focus on what the other person is doing wrong rather than focusing on strengths. Acknowledging strengths and contributions can calm and soothe even the most troubled individuals.
- 3. Remember people's humanity** - Being grounded in a deliberate compassion can keep a negative situation from exploding. Miss Tuff's life and death situation is testimony to this tip. Rather than shaming the gunman, she treated him with dignity even though he had an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition.

By integrating deliberate calmness, conversations, and compassion into your leadership, you are more likely to exude a peace that gives you power. The power described in this article isn't about "lording over" your employees. It's a power that comes when you are deliberate to do the opposite of the brain's natural tendency to respond with fight/flight/freeze and focus on the good. Learning from Miss Tuff's example, it's a peace that inspires the best in others that doesn't come from force. Now that *is* powerful!

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Bonnie Artman Fox helps leaders create the conditions for a positive, collaborative work culture. Her background as a Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, Psychiatric, and Addiction's Nurse has given her a keen understanding of the interpersonal challenges that inhibit organizations from thriving. She has a knack for redirecting the negative to focusing on the good and helping leaders build trust and engagement with their teams. The end result is a work culture focused on individual strengths, engaged employees, improved productivity, and increased bottom line. She specializes in teaching communication skills to deal with difficult people and situations in the workplace.

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