To be Forewarned is to be Forearmed

by Richard Shank | August 2009

The following story is a composite of several situations. Names, locations, and other facts have been changed to illustrate and simplify the case.

Keith tried to change his position in the hospital bed to lessen his pain. He tried to recall what had happened. He remembered seeing the blinding lights and hearing Sally's screams, but there his memory stopped. Sally told him yesterday he had been unconscious for fifteen days. When he asked how soon he could leave the hospital, she had evaded his questions, so he knew that probably meant it would be a long time.

His mind drifted to his business. How were his 12 employees faring in his absence? Were his customers being serviced adequately? Were the bills being paid in time to earn cash discounts? Was there adequate money in the bank to operate? Were customer quotations being calculated profitably? What was the situation with the big Hamilton contract? His body jerked as he remembered what Jack told him about his experience. He'd had brain surgery, and by the time he was discharged from the hospital, his business was in such bad condition that Jack couldn't salvage it. A few weeks later Jack received about 25% of the value of his inventory and equipment at the auction of his business. He was left with a mountain of debt.

Then Keith relaxed. In his foggy condition he gradually remembered the many hours he had spent teaching his staff what to do in an emergency, so his business would not end like Jack's. The plan he had set up was akin to having his employees call 911 in the event of a fire. He had used a 3-part teaching method: a checklist of things to do if he wasn’t around, the thought processes he used in making decisions, and the occasional hands-on situation in which they were allowed to make decisions as if they were the owner.

Keith fondly remembered the vacation he and Sally had taken. That four-week trip to Alaska stood out in his memory. Before they left, he had reviewed with the department managers the decisions each would need to make, and each received a refresher course. Some of them were apprehensive about having the responsibility to make decisions which could cost the company big bucks if they were made wrong, but Keith had reassured them. “Just use your best judgment. You’ve observed my decisions in the past, and I’ve taught you my thought processes. When I return, if you find you have made some bad choices, I won’t scold you, providing you did your best. It will be the best training you will ever learn. But what I will do is to review the poor decisions with you, and explain what would have been a better choice, and why it would have been better. Then we’ll all be wiser and better prepared for a future catastrophe.” Keith was amazed at how they had risen to the occasion, and of the few mistakes they had made.

Now his personal catastrophe was here. Keith relaxed. He remembered how well the business had operated in his Alaskan absence, and the new confidence his staff exhibited as they went about their daily work in his presence. Gone were the days in which it seemed someone was at his elbow constantly. How much is this? How do we do that? There isn’t enough money in the bank. Which bills should be paid? Harry arrived 15 minutes late this morning, what should I do about it? The customer wants to have it delivered some evening rather than during the day. Will we do it? He now knew that the constant barrage of questions from his employees were the result of prior poor teaching.

Yes, pain caused his body to wince every time he moved. But he knew his business would still be running profitably when he returned. He smiled when he thought how each of them would react when he praised their dependability.

Keith also remembered what he had often heard. “To be forewarned is to be forearmed.” He resolved to teach his strategy to some of the younger businessmen in his church group, so they could avoid the tragedy of negligence.

“To be Forewarned is to be Forearmed” from the August 2009 issue of Stewardship Connections, a publication of Anabaptist Financial. Reprinted with Permission.

Source URL: https://www.afweb.org/news/articles/be-forewarned-be-forearmed-richard-shank