Gmail Jolene Latimer <jolene.latimer@gmail.com>

Unlocking the Power of Empathy

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The Daily Coach <thedailycoach@mail.beehiiv.com> Wed, Jul 30, 2025 at 4:02 AM
Reply-To: The Daily Coach <Newsletter@thedaily.coach>
To: "jolene.latimer@gmail.com" <jolene.latimer@gmail.com>

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THE DAILY COACH

Unlocking the Power of Empathy

Empathy isn't just kindness — it's presence. Not because it's expected, but because someone needs it.

The Daily Coach is excited to share a new opportunity to join our team! The Daily Coach is looking for a "Growth Lead" to help bring The Daily Coach to more leaders and learners. You can learn more about the opportunity here.

Most of the time, it's the quiet acts no one's keeping score of that end up defining who we are. Choosing empathy is one of those. It's easy to skip in most cases — no one would ever know the difference. But now and then, you get to see what happens because you made the effort. Sometimes, those results are life-changing.

That's what former Toronto Maple Leafs president Brendan Shanahan found out last year.

Shanahan had been looking for ways to reconnect the organization with its alumni. Not just the legends, but the forgotten names. The ones who had drifted away quietly, or in some cases, been pushed out.

That's when someone mentioned Gerry McNamara.

McNamara had spent nearly three decades with the Leafs — first as a backup goalie, then a scout, and eventually general manager. He was the one who brought legends Borje Salming and Inge Hammarström to Toronto. He used the first overall pick in 1985 to draft Wendel Clark. His fingerprints are all over modern Leafs history. His legacy, though under-acknowledged, is part of the team's foundation.

But he'd been gone a long time.

After being fired during a messy internal power struggle in 1988, McNamara walked away from the game completely. He stopped watching and stopped talking to the hockey community. He didn't just lose his job. He lost his sense of belonging.

When Shanahan eventually got McNamara on the phone, he was surprised by what he heard. By then, McNamara was in his late 80s. Shanahan assumed time had softened the experience. It hadn't.

That changed the approach. Shanahan wasn't trying to rewrite history — but he did want to acknowledge it. He saw someone who had given decades to the organization and had been made to feel invisible. He understood the importance of doing something about that.

He started by inviting McNamara to his golf tournament, then encouraged him to come back to games and spend time in the alumni suite. There was no big announcement. No forced reconciliation. Just small, sincere efforts to make someone feel like they were part of the team again.

McNamara started reengaging with the hockey community. He joined alumni calls and attended events. Eventually, the Leafs honored him during a game, where Wendel Clark presented him with an alumni blazer.

Shanahan's timing turned out to be more meaningful than he could have imagined. Just a year after the Leafs welcomed McNamara back and honored him at center ice, McNamara died of pneumonia. The final chapter of his life included reconnection, recognition, and a sense of returning home.

There was no playbook for what Shanahan did. It wasn't a strategy. It wasn't for credit. It was simply a leader recognizing that he had a chance — maybe a final one — to do something right. To let McNamara know — and feel — that he mattered, Shanahan took it.

That's what empathy looks like in power. Not just kindness, but presence. Not because anyone demanded it, but because someone needed it. That choice, quiet as it was, may have been the most lasting act of leadership Shanahan ever made with the Leafs before he too left the organization after the 2024-25 NHL season.

Leadership is often measured in big decisions and bold moves. But sometimes, the quiet, unseen moments of empathy are what truly define us. When we consider how to lead better — not just for the sake of results, but for the people we serve — it's worth pausing and reflecting on our own actions and intentions.

Let's ask ourselves:

- When was the last time we reached out to someone who had quietly fallen out of our orbit? What stopped us from making that call? What might change if we did it today?
- How often do we think about those who have left our organization, not just the ones who left on good terms, but those who were hurt, overlooked, or forgotten?
- What small, quiet acts of empathy could we commit to that wouldn't take much time or resources, but might mean everything to someone else?