Show Me the Money (Another Lesson in Humility)

Now I would like to relate a short story about how I learned a very good lesson in humility at a very young age, in the fall of 1980. The saw crew worked very hard that year and exceeded all targets for thinning and slashing as well as lots of firefighting and prescribed burning. At the end of the 1980 season the district was having an awards ceremony for seasonals who had performed exceptionally well. I thought my crew deserved recognition. Some of the other crews got cash awards from the ranger. Then my crew got called up and they were given certificates of appreciation which thanked them for a job well done but didn’t come with any cash. The fire management officer at the time was a man named Owen Young who didn’t believe in giving cash awards for work performance. I was extremely disappointed.

After the awards meeting, being pretty full of myself, I went into Owen’s office and closed the door. I threw my hat down on Owen’s desk and said, “What is the deal, Owen? Why didn’t the saw crew get cash awards?” I told him the saw crew had worked harder than any other crew on the district. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “If you don’t get it Dave, maybe we got the wrong guy for your job”. Owen caught my attention in an instant! I stepped back about three feet, picked up my hat and left his office with my tail between my legs. I was totally humbled and by then I had gotten it. I had also really made my boss mad which was not a good thing. It was a Friday so I had all weekend to think about it. I realized if I came back Monday morning with a bad attitude I would totally destroy the morale of my crew which had been excellent all season.

On Monday as we were driving in our truck to the work site, the crew started talking about how they should have gotten cash awards, I stood up for Owen and told them that he really appreciated the work they had done and that the certificates of appreciation was how he wanted to honor them. Things got better after that.

When we got back to the station that evening I went down to Owen’s office again, closed the door again, didn’t throw my hat down again, and apologized to him for my behavior. I also told him that I had supported his way of honoring the crew when I talked to them that morning. He thanked me for that. This was a most valuable lesson for me for the rest of my life. It taught me another lesson in humility and to appreciate whatever pats on the back you get, not just monetary awards.