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To lead, you must lower the drawbridge

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Castles are usually the domain of epic battles and royal proceedings, not seminars for business executives.

But in that respect, Charlotte resident R. John Young doesn't stand on ceremony. Next month, he'll take eight executives to the idyllic Ballynahinch Castle in the Republic of Ireland, where they'll study business leadership and sleep where the O'Flaherty clan once ruled.

Young, 61, is a native of Northern Ireland. He started Charlotte's McLaughlin Young Group, a "human capital" consulting firm in Charlotte, in 1987 -- around the time he helped found the Irish Society of Charlotte.

McLaughlin Young, which advises and researches on topics related to human resources, has about 25 employees in Charlotte. For more than 15 years, Young has gathered executives from across the U.S. and Europe for seminars in Ireland.

Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and length.

Q. Tell me more about your leadership seminar.

It's amazing to watch the interaction that happens between (people from) two continents over the different ways they approach business. (The Republic of) Ireland is also an intriguing place, because it's gone from being Third World 30 years ago to being very much First World. It now has a higher per-capita income than the (United Kingdom), which is amazing.

Q. How did it do that?

The main thing was, it put a huge emphasis on education. They also emphasized searching for companies that were green oriented, and this was before green was fashionable -- high tech, pharmaceuticals. They also, after observing what happened in the U.K. in the '60s and '70s, found ways to work well with labor.

The other huge factor was membership in the (European Union): It was one of the first member states of the EU. The complexion of Ireland is changing dramatically, particularly in the past two or three years. There are people coming from all the EU member countries to work in Ireland. There are lots of building needs.

Q. Your seminar focuses on the importance of creativity for business leaders. What's so important about it?

We hear all the time: Is the United States competitive with other countries? That's absolutely where creativity and innovation are necessary. Healthy companies are adaptable: new products, new solutions, being able to see something differently. The creativity can also be in how we manage relationships with employees, how we structure the workplace.

I'm always amazed when we learn what people do outside of the workplace -- the hobbies they have, the creativities they have -- that never get utilized in the workplace because of the leadership style. When a leader accepts money from a company purportedly to be a leader, they give up the right to be ignorant about their people.

Q. *What are other big problems that you see in workplaces?*

One of the epidemics is disengagement. People disengage when they don't feel they have a relationship with their leader or the business, they don't feel communicated with, they don't feel listened to or respected.

I often remind executives of three things they often succumb to. First, they confuse intelligence and academic achievement. Just because someone hasn't achieved to the level they have doesn't mean they're not smart.

Second, somehow managers infer that hourly employees are not committed to the workplace. That's counterintuitive. People *want* to work well. The brain strives for the pleasure it derives from executing work with quality, symmetry and form.

And third is (they assume) that people don't want to be led. People absolutely want to be led, but they can tell the difference between the true leader and the executive who's scared stiff in his own skin.

Q. *Who are some business leaders that you admire?*

One person is Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A; he's got a very wholesome attitude toward work and life. In Celtic tradition, we don't separate work and play. The people we tend to admire because of their longevity in contributions, people like Alan Greenspan, Henry Kissinger -- here they are in their 80s and still at the top of their game -- I guarantee they don't separate work and play. They will take respite from work, but they absolutely have that passion for work and play, because to them it's one and the same.