

The following are several pages from:

CHAPTER FOUR

EXCEL AT “GREET AND TRAIN”

“A guest never forgets the host who had treated him kindly.”

Homer

Imagine your last nervous steps as you walk towards the front door of the next company you are visiting to apply for a job. Then imagine that instead of a grumpy response from the receptionist when you ask for an application, you get a pleasant smile and a warm greeting. How’s that for a start?

Creating the right atmosphere for attracting high quality applicants begins at the front door. If applicants are treated kindly with a degree of common respect, your corporate image grows immensely. Perhaps they are seated in a conference room, offered a cup of coffee and a take-home brochure designed specifically for applicants. Maybe a video could be played describing what the company does, what it stands for and what opportunities are available.

Would you want to work at such a place? Who wouldn’t? It’s a cliché now but ‘You never get a second chance to make a first impression’ is true not just for the applicant but also for the company. There may not be a job for that applicant but she will speak highly of you nonetheless. And if there is a job, the new hire will begin with nothing but favorable thoughts about their new venture.

Be the host by whom you would want to be received.

NOBODY EVER TOLD ME THAT BEFORE ...

Alisa timidly knocked on my open office door and peered in. I looked up from my desk and waved her towards me. I knew it was her first day as a Customer Service Rep and I had been expecting her.

We exchanged some small talk about how she had come to interview and be hired and then I got down to my real purpose. I felt that I needed to reach the new hires on a different level so I tried something I had never done before.

For about ten minutes I talked to Alisa about “The Big Picture”. I did something that no employer I ever worked for had ever done with me. I talked UP to Alisa and told her all about what we are “really” doing.

Talking about the big picture is a calm, mature and hopefully inspiring conversation about your industry. In my case, I was talking about my courier business. So I would take a few moments to describe how the industry began; how as time became more important, the need for faster delivery generated higher demand. Then I would talk about our customers and what they do and how we help them. Finally, I would elaborate on the impact we have and how completing a delivery on time might assist our client in landing a big account or expanding faster and generating new jobs. I’d go on for quite a while talking about how our company fit into the overall economy and how we helped our customers in some small way to achieve their dreams.

Then, I brought it all back to Alisa and her job. I told her how she would have an impact; how she personally could help others to make their goals and perhaps to assist in the creation of jobs for others. I explained how important it was for her to take the orders swiftly and accurately with a maximum of courtesy to the caller. I really wanted to give some deeper meaning to each

specific act within her job description and I was hoping that this new approach might do just that.

All the while, Alisa sat demurely, listening courteously and patiently hearing me out. She had probably heard some variation of this in the interview but not from me and not in this kind of detail. When I finished, she looked at me a bit wide-eyed and I feared I had missed the mark.

She added to my fears with one short sentence. She looked at me sincerely and said, *"No one ever told me anything like that before..."*

And then she set my fears aside as this young new hire smiled and said, *"...and it was wonderful! I've never worked anywhere where I was explained what the company is really doing and how I fit in. It means a lot to me that you told me that. And I understand why Linda was training me so hard today on some of the details. We've all got a big responsibility here."*

Our meeting ended and as she left the room I breathed a huge sigh of relief. My description of the big picture DID seem to hit a chord with her and help her understand and value the aspects of her job that would impact others. Later, I found that talking UP to my employees and sharing more views of the big picture were some of the best conversations I ever had. I learned to appreciate and value those moments that this simple tactic produced and, as usual, to kick myself for not learning this lesson faster.

GB

“The training of children is a profession where we must know how to waste time in order to save it.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Our employees are not our children but the principal is the same. Often, training seems to be this big necessary evil that gets in the way of real work. When you need ‘a body’ right away to fill a gap, training simply slows down progress. So, we fail to do it properly.

The first way to avoid this issue is to plan and prepare properly. Anticipating the need for new hires can minimize manpower surprises. Is it always just bad luck that put you into a manpower shortage situation? If luck is the residue of design then bad luck must be the residue of poor design.

Having a well prepared training program in place with reading materials and videos is a step in the right time-saving direction. Hiring before the need is another. But, ultimately, failing to take the time to train new hires properly will cost you more in the long run. Poorly trained workers create problems that are far more expensive than the brief training time required to do it right.

Rousseau recognized that training is perceived as a waste of time but the disciplined manager knows it must be done anyway. And that manager knows it is not truly wasted. It is an investment in the employee that will pay small but frequent dividends down the road.

“It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop.”

Confucius

Our first logical reaction to this saying by Confucius is to set it aside; to disregard it as old school thinking; to discount its relevance in our ‘I-need-it-yesterday’ world.

That would be a mistake. Steeped in Chinese tradition, is the long term outlook adopted in much of what they do. Confucius is not talking about moving slowly in a single deed. Rather he is speaking to our larger endeavors as in building a business. This thought brings us back to commitment and the value of a steadfast course of action.

Too many times, companies have adopted a philosophy of operating but have failed to embrace the commitment to that philosophy which must go along with it. The pace of change has sped up dramatically but gaining the fruits of Corporate Change is not an overnight process. It requires long range thinking and an earnest and eager assumption of the philosophy behind it.

Training is, as we know, viewed as an unproductive and inconvenient interruption to the actual business cycle. It seems to move slowly and the results are not always immediately evident. But it is a key component to building a future and becoming the kind of company in which all employees are on the same page.

To create a company full of motivated, inspired, engaged employees, you must first make the decision to begin your long journey with a single step. And then, armed with your faith, do not stop.

THE PERFECT TRAINER

I had run my courier service company in Seattle for 25 years before I discovered a key error in my ways. When a new courier would come to work for us, he or she was usually experienced in most aspects of doing an actual physical delivery. However, we still needed to train them on our paperwork, our "radio protocol" (which we called it even after we stopped using radios and switched to cell phones) and other unique dispatch practices that we utilized. Just to make it more difficult, we operated quite differently from other courier services so it was a challenge to bring new folks up to speed quickly.

Naturally, when I was searching around for someone to assign to the task of training the new drivers, I would consistently pick one of our existing drivers who had shown impressive skills on the road. I wanted the very best driver I had training people and showing them the ropes. Makes sense, right?

If you look at your own company, I'll bet you would do the same. You don't want a poor performer to train new people. And you wouldn't want anyone who did not display good work habits and high productivity, right? Of course not, so you probably have your best workers train the new hires. Makes all the sense in the world ...

...except it doesn't. And it took me more than two decades to figure that out. Hey, I'm a consistent plodder, not a genius.

It happened at a meeting with my Operations Management team. We were bemoaning the latest set of problems created by new drivers who did not follow proper procedures. *"Why O why,"* I cried, *"are these new guys so clueless? We trained them on this. They are supposed to know it. What happened to the good old days when guys like Rick and Chuck and Phil were coming on board and became superstars overnight?"*

Turns out my memory was a bit foggy. No one was a superstar overnight but as the company got larger and technology invaded our world, the job had gotten more complex. There were more details to remember and less margin

for error. Mistakes we made “in the old days” were not caught and reported by the watchful eye of the computer.

Still, we trained them, why weren’t they getting it? After bouncing that question around a bit, I found out that the new drivers were not remembering all the details because there were so many ... and because our trainers were delivering them in the same way they delivered packages ... with all due haste! The trainers were telling them everything but they weren’t communicating. They were glossing over details and doing what had always worked well for them before ... working quickly.

Enter Dave. Dave was a very competent courier for us but he was older, more experienced in life, and a calm easy going fellow. We asked Dave to do some training because we thought he might slow down the conversation pace a bit and make more headway with the new drivers.

The results were staggering. Many new drivers reported that they had a “pleasant training session” with Dave and understood what had to be done now. Dave slowed down the communication and made sure his trainee understood each point before moving on to the next one. He asked a lot of questions like *“Does that make sense to you?”* and *“Am I going too fast?”* Dave had finely tuned listening skills so he waited to get the feedback he needed before moving on. We saw positive results immediately!

Yes, it was a simple lesson but it was learned the hard way. When selecting a trainer, make sure they are a communicator **first** and a star performer **second**.

GB

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.”

Aristotle

Getting your tennis serve delivered into that perfect spot; firing arrows into the bulls eye at the archery range; making the soccer ball bend as it flies into the goal. These are wondrous acts that happen because the athlete practiced and trained repeatedly over and over again. No one who understands sports believes otherwise. And yet, in business, we often expect excellence to occur with little or no training.

Aristotle was not someone most of us would care to debate. He certainly had an insightful mind and here he reminds us that good acts are often the effect of good training. That repeatedly showing an employee the correct way to handle a problem can produce the positive results we are after.

Yet, most businesses choose to debate Aristotle. They say, *“We just want to expect our people to do it right the first time. We told them how and if they can’t do it right, we’ll find someone who can.”*

Perhaps the fault is not theirs. Possibly it is your training process that is faulty or your follow-up/follow through that is suspect. Workers will do the ‘virtuous’ act when they have been trained effectively to do it. Excellence is a habit. It is your job to cultivate it.

“Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterwards.”

Vernon Sanders Law

There is another saying that goes “The only training for leadership is leadership.” Yes, we have all been there. Experience IS a hard teacher. As managers, you are essentially learning on the job daily. The number of times you must do something you have never done before increases as you rise up the ladder. You are faced with trying to draw on the experience of similar past events and somehow divine your way through the latest crisis.

And, yes, all the lessons come after the fact. So how do you navigate through that and avoid failure? Well, you don’t. Failure is inevitable at some point or another so come to grips with that. Remember the old bromide: If you are not failing, you are not trying hard enough. The goal is not to avoid failure but to succeed in such a way that you minimize the effects of failure. Failure in itself is not a bad thing. When Thomas Edison was criticized for failing to invent the electric light bulb after thousands of attempts, he exclaimed, *“I have not failed 1,000 times. I have successfully discovered 1,000 ways to NOT make a light bulb!”*

Small failures are the price you pay for your management education. What you learn from those is far more valuable than any knowledge from a string of successes. With success you learn what happened to work that one time. With failure you learned what doesn’t work and you know not to go down that road again.

How you handle a defeat is just as important. In trying to build a company full of motivated, empowered employees, you have a great opportunity to set an example. Be open about your failure. Discuss it with your employees. Dissect it. Analyze why it did not work and share that so others may learn too. Help your employees to realize that failure is not to be feared but the willingness to confront it is.

SUMMARY:

Pay now or pay later. That is your mantra concerning training. Training isn't limited to just showing a new hire how to do their specific job. It is also training your new team member how to interact and participate with the other employees. It is training him or her about your corporate culture and how you expect excellence, trust and sincere effort.

- Start applicants out right. Show your best side and make your company a highly desirable place to work.
- Share the big picture. Make sure every new hire understands what role they play and how their work affects everyone else.
- Find a way to make time for quality training. Create an effective training program that can, if necessary, be launched on short notice. Discipline yourself to make the time for proper training available.
- Keep in mind the changing demographic forces that are at play today. Younger employees are more likely to move on unless you give them good reasons to stay. Your investment in training cannot pay off if they leave.
- Make sure your trainers are first rate communicators.
- Remember that the cost of ineffective training is never evident up front. It is a bill that comes payable much later and always cost more than the initial training would have.

So now you have a company with dynamic employees, all in the right roles, in a positive frame of mind and well trained. Your next step is to insure that each and every one of them is motivated by the opportunity to affect the size of their own paycheck: Incentivize, Bonus and Reward.