

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: Doing What's Right

By David H. McNair

Inspiration when you least expect it

It was a relatively chilly morning. As many of you were looking forward to the long Thanksgiving weekend, I was on the outskirts of Atlanta in the spacious and bustling warehouse of William M. Bird Company. It was rainy and dark in these early morning hours as we started our meeting with a sizable group of the company's associates.

It's often that I find myself before such a group. What is not often, however, is that I come away having been so inspired. You see it all started with one of William M. Bird's associates, Rick Wallace.

Rick is the warehouse manager at this well run distribution center. Rick is a man of quiet demeanor, and thoughtful focus. He is also a man who exudes a respect for the people with whom he works. And as you might expect, those same people show a respect for Rick.

Do What's Right...and Do What Makes Sense

As Rick stood before this diverse group of company associates, he began with a confident and upbeat "Good Morning." While he continued talking, the employees showed a high level of attention -- the sort of attention that stems from genuine interest -- not because Rick was *the boss* to many in the room.

Shortly into Rick's comments, he asked the associates a question; "Now what is it that I ask of each of you?" Without hesitation the group responded with a blended voice, "*Do what's right and do what makes sense.*" "That's right," he said, "it's just that simple."

And just that simple it is. Doing what's right means showing up to work on time. It means picking the right stock number off the shelf. It means filling out paperwork properly.

And doing what makes sense means that if a stock item is damaged, you don't pack it, you report it. It means doing what you would hope someone would do for you if it was your order that was being packed.

In the world of employee training, one of the most difficult concepts for companies to convey is the importance of each and every individual in the delivery of service to its customers. How, after all, do the behind-the-scenes employees stay focused on the customer? They may never see or talk directly with a customer.

Becoming a Service Partner

Many companies attempt to create a customer focus for non-frontline employees by talking about the *internal customer* versus the *external customer*. While that may work to some extent, this approach can tend to fragment or dilute a focus on the true customer of the organization. The approach I recommend is one of partnership. You see, by seeing each other as partners, you build a sense of teamwork – with all team members having their eyes on the same target...your company's customer!

What Rick Wallace made so clear to his associates was that by doing what's right and what makes sense, you will be doing right by the customer. By doing what's right and what makes sense, you will also do right by each other. And by doing what's right and what makes sense, you will be doing the best for the company. Mutually exclusive they are not.

From Associate to Mentor

In a further demonstration of Rick's respect for employees, he described a new mentoring program for William M. Bird. He spoke of the opportunity for associates to train associates. He spoke of a program open to anyone at any level. He described a program that was exciting. He described a program of responsibility and accountability. He let the associates know their value, and he let them know of his trust.

Amen

It was apparent that Rick's comments were from the heart, not scripted or memorized. Not only did I listen attentively to him, but I watched the faces of the others in the room. As Rick turned the remainder of the meeting over to me, I could only think of one word...Amen.

The busiest of all seasons

Over the next four weeks, many of us will do more shopping than we do in the other 48 weeks combined. We will have an opportunity to experience customer service in its most demanding of times.

During this same time, we will also have a tremendous opportunity...an opportunity to treat others as we would like them to treat us. This especially goes for our fellow employees. Provide encouragement, demonstrate your support, and pass along a smile so that they can pass it along to others. After all, it's simply the right thing to do.