



# **b**usiness A MAGAZINE FOR THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY ISSUE 111 FEBRUARY 2009 **e**xecutive

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Thirty years ago as a youngster starting her career, **Lynda King Taylor** wrote a book ahead of its time

# "Can you succeed in business and still get to Heaven?"

Now, in 2009, we see her reactions become boardroom pointers

I was fortunate to have Edward de Bono as my mentor. Some time ago we were on a BBC programme together "Start the Week". This sets the cultural agenda, every Monday morning, in politics, history, science, business and the arts.

There was a debate on boredom in business! That launched Edward and me on our shared interest: that the best businesses to succeed would be those whose core characteristics were creativity, social responsibility, energetically ethical, supreme in service, with a robust reputation for respect for all their staff, suppliers and stakeholders. They would never be boring, but rather daring to be different and exceeding expectations.

Edward mentioned that the best would have "mentoring programmes". In these, newcomers are paired with more experienced people, to obtain best practice and advice as they advance. Mentoring inspires individuals to improve their learning so that they meet, even exceed, their potential, performance, philosophy and personality. Many of the world's most successful people have benefited from having a mentor. Today, mentors provide their expertise to less experienced individuals to help them advance their careers, enhance their education, and build their networks. Whenever I have met those in charge of creditable companies, leaders in organisations who are revered and respected, they have all had a mentor. I mention this because their businesses also have superior competence and consistency.

They exude excellence – creating the culture – being right first time, on time, every time, exceeding customers'

expectations. They believe instinctively there is always a good case for treating all customers as number one. This is especially so when, all too often, new technology gives ways of avoiding the cost/benefit pressures to deal with only the most "important" customers. Top organisations realise that *every customer is potentially their most important customer!*

**Excellent organisations ... mentor, manage and motivate daily, in a manner essential to a charismatic culture in a competitive environment.**

As an example, take the world renowned charity Oxfam. Oxfam works towards putting an end to poverty worldwide and believes poverty is not inevitable, it is an injustice that can be tackled. Some years ago Oxfam received a legacy "out of the blue". They had never heard of the person who gave it. They checked with her family why she had given to them. They found that some time before, the woman had been shopping in an Oxfam shop. She had a nasty turn on the stairs and the volunteers looked after her, made her tea, and wouldn't let her go until they were sure she was OK. Called her a taxi ... and then thought no more ... it was just looking after their customers. One cup of tea ... a six figure gift. You never know who

you're being nice to!

Excellent organisations do this instinctively. They mentor, manage and motivate daily, in a manner essential to a charismatic culture in a competitive environment. This is especially so when their brand/product/service is under threat, or its reputation requires restoring. Thinking from the customer's perspective saves corporate money. Always viewing service from the outside in, improves the bottom line. Successful organisations all have innovative and inspiring climates. Their corporate culture – characteristic



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consistency of process, personality and performance – impacts the bottom-line. Think of the companies you do repeat business with; there may not be many. However, they will all have a connection between values and performance; they believe business success need not be incompatible with a genuine improvement in the quality of life for all their stakeholders.

Recently I asked a random sample of people from all walks of life, which was their top UK retailer, and why? 90% said John Lewis, and also their food flagship, Waitrose. John

Lewis employees are Partners, or co-owners of the business. As such they are ambitious in their policies, the way they work and do business. As a Partnership the firm recognises that the management of social, ethical and environmental issues involves everyone. They believe that their long-term future is best served by respecting the interests of all stakeholders: staff, suppliers, customers and the wider community. They are always actively looking for opportunities to improve the environment and to contribute to the wellbeing of the communities in which they trade.

John Lewis has seven business principles: purpose, power, profit, members, customers, business and relationships. These align perfectly with current thinking on corporate social responsibility (CSR). The Board set out their responsibilities in terms of community investment, environmental protection, responsible sourcing, fair trading, workplace dignity, diversity and equality.

Building a corporate culture based on these principles ensures CSR issues are embedded in the way they run the business. They believe this culture ensures “we deal with our customers, suppliers and all stakeholders with integrity and respect; this is at the heart of our commercial success”.

Today, this business brand has a CSR reputation covering all areas from animal testing to additives, carrier bags to climate change, product to packaging perfection, recycling to responsible resourcing. This is their brand and behaviour. As such, they are trusted by consumers and customers – internal and external – recognised today as leaders in CSR, valuing the trust their customers have placed in them over the years, especially as a result of taking a stand on issues that matter. As a responsible retailer, they believe it is important to communicate clearly what these issues are, how they impact their business, and the position they take. They use every medium to do this with customers, communities, employees, environmentalists, suppliers and stakeholders. You seldom get a second chance to impress – with this operation there is no need to – their reputation precedes them.

Take another organisation with a product some may disagree with. However, their philanthropy and wide ethical expenditure ensures that they are admired; customers prefer to do business with them rather than with alternatives. Ladbrokes plc is a world-leader in the betting and gaming market. They take up to 10 million bets each week and over £14 billion in stakes each year across Europe and Asia. They have a robust “Responsible Business” behaviour, from the boardroom to their betting shops which, according to their CEO, “is not only central to our licence to operate; it also fully supports our strategy for growth.”

Professionals and punters know the Ladbrokes brand is internationally synonymous with integrity and fair play, upholding best practice industry standards. This provides added assurance for their customers and employees. The company believes in social investment and encourages employees to become active members of their local communities. Today the Ladbrokes betting shop is at the heart of the communities where they operate; there are daily stories about their shops which are committed to supporting local people. They encourage healthier and safer places to live and work, as well as fundraise for community causes. They are involved in a number of initiatives across the UK in support of community safety, including an ongoing relationship with the police and Crimestoppers, the organisation which encourages people to give anonymous information on crime to the police. Ladbrokes’ 2,133 shops

on British high streets display Crimestoppers posters and leaflets detailing the hotline number.

Their reputation for social responsibility has paid off; Ladbrokes have been recognised by two of the foremost external responsible investment indices. Their “Heavenly” corporate responsibility standards were recognised by the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) and FTSE4 Good Index. They were the only UK-based, and one of only two global betting and gaming companies to be included in the DJSI index series for 2008-9.

Profit is too often proffered as the only measure by which businesses judge their success. Too often the pursuit of wealth – some would say, given 2008 events, global greed – has been deemed the dominant motivation of management. Some senior executives are seen to be constantly in pursuit of greater personal wealth at the expense of consumers and communities. As shown in the examples above, the creation of wealth is not the only valid business objective, albeit a vital

and valuable one. Old beliefs are being challenged – 2009 onwards will see societies, and conditions governing them, changing rapidly. In business there can be profit in building goodwill – enlightened enterprises and entrepreneurs know this: it is common sense. Sadly though, common sense is not so common!

A final example: global telecoms is a competitive market place. I call this the “stupid bills” story, which shows that approaching issues from the customer’s perspective affects the bottom-line and can save money. Over recent years the telecoms market has opened-up with some companies losing many customers. When the customers

move, some will owe a little. A particular telecoms giant chases them, even for £1! However, many customers are in credit. I know people who have continued to receive this organisation’s multi-page credit statements, for as little as 21p, for years – hardly a way of persuading people to come back.

This way of doing business suggests a wasteful company which never thinks of the customer. Just think: one person assigned to cleaning up this mess would save costs and gain brownie points. Try being creative, innovative; what if those customers got ONE letter saying “You’re in credit but you’ve left us. We’re going to give your 21p (or whatever) to Charity, unless you send us the enclosed card saying you want it back.” Ninety five per cent would not respond and the company would gain goodwill, and save money as well as the planet’s paper! How many more cases like this are there? Think like a customer, behave with benevolence from the boardroom – then you can succeed in business and still get to Heaven.

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**In business there can be profit in building goodwill - enlightened enterprises and entrepreneurs know this: it is common sense.**

Lynda's book *Can you succeed in business and still get to Heaven?* is shortly to be re-issued. We will review this seminal work when it is published and try to arrange a special offer for our readers.