



Facilitator — April/May 2012



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Sharpen Your Tools

Mark Scharenbroich

A Ride to the Grocery Store

Neighborhood grocery store owner forms special connection with customers, employees

I've never been on a Harley. I've never dreamed of owning a Harley. And I've never thought of myself as a Harley kind of guy. But I do understand the connection Harley riders have with each other. Even if you are not a Harley rider, if you say "Nice bike" to one, I guarantee you'll receive a warm smile back.

Saying "Nice bike" serves as my metaphor for connecting with others. I believe once our basic needs are met, we all have two core, significant needs:

- 1) We need to belong. Whether to a family, a tribe, a faith community, a great company or a united team, we all need to feel connected.
- 2) We all need to hear a version of "Nice bike." This translates to "I see you, I hear you and I appreciate you. This world, this organization or this community is a better place because you're in it. You belong."

Connections Matter

Connecting with others is important. It matters in both our personal and professional lives. It matters on the world stage and in our own backyards. When we keep our radar up and notice the connections around us, we learn daily lessons on how to treat others. To be a part of an authentic and meaningful connection is a rich experience. You never know when you might be interacting with an organization or business that takes pride in building strong connections with its employees, customers and community.

When it gets cold in my home state of Minnesota—and I mean really cold—we either drive out on a frozen lake to go fishing or stay home and eat. So, we love our world-class grocery stores, Lunds and Byerly's. They are absolutely beautiful, and when relatives come to town, it's not unusual to take them to these stores for a fun visit.

Lunds and Byerly's have set the bar extremely high. The mundane run for a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk is an experience. The produce is displayed perfectly, the meat counter reminds you of a small-town butcher shop and their range of offerings is impressive; for example, they have 31 different types of mustard.

We also love our neighborhood grocery store, Fresh Seasons, which was opened by Dale Riley, the former president of Byerly's. Inspired by the quality of Lunds and Byerly's, Fresh Seasons offers its own brand of world-class service. The walls are decorated with warm colors and art. It stocks homemade goods in the deli and a wide variety of meats and fresh seafood. It's a gem.

The most impressive aspect of Fresh Seasons is the staff and the connection they make with their customers and each other. Everyone goes out of his or her way to remember your name and take an interest in you as a customer. The staff makes you feel like an honored guest, and it works; you really do want to go back, take the kids and stay awhile. They seem authentically happy that they're working at Fresh Seasons and that you're shopping there.

A Store-wide Effort

Getting the entire team at a grocery store—from the produce department and the meat counter to the cashier

and the bagger— to buy into providing personal and authentic customer experiences is impressive.

Behind this true customer service experience is Dale Riley. He knows how to connect with his customers and his team. Chances are, if you meet Riley once, he will remember you the next time you walk into the store. He's also easy to find. You'll see him bagging groceries, sweeping the front walk, taking care of a spill or drinking coffee with the customers in the deli.

I once heard a customer ask him, "Dale, is there anything you don't do here?"

"Nope," he answered.

People are willing to follow a manager who is willing to walk in everyone's shoes. Plus, if Riley is not in the store, you'll find one of his managers modeling his lead. They're easy to spot, and their positive presence is felt by everyone in the store—both employees and customers.

When I asked Riley how he gets his team on board with delivering such high levels of customer service, he said, "Three things: I ask my team to take ownership in the store, take an interest in our guests and have fun. It's that simple."

It may be simple in theory, but it isn't as easy execute. If it were, every manager would do it. It takes effort on a daily basis to create and maintain a strong culture that connects an entire team. Great organizations have great leaders who not only get it but also work at it daily. And the rewards are easy to notice.

The Mark of a Great Leader

Riley is a great leader because he connects with his employees. He helps them feel great about coming to work and creates a family culture with the entire team. He takes an interest in who they are and what they like, and he values their ideas. In other words, Riley makes it a point to say "Nice bike" to them often.

One of the baggers at Fresh Seasons is a high school student named Gabby. Her name fits her personality. As Gabby bags your groceries, she chats with you about your items. "Do you really like this?" "I've never had this before." "Did you know that was on sale?" "How do you cook these?"

Gabby said she really enjoys working at Fresh Seasons. "It's fun!" she said. "Everyone here gets along really well. Plus, Mr. Riley is the best boss in the world. He really knows us. Mr. Riley found out that I was a huge fan of Cesar Millan, the Dog Whisperer. Cesar is on the National Geographic Channel all of the time, and I just love him! The Dog Whisperer came to Minneapolis for a presentation, and Mr. Riley got tickets for my parents and me to attend. That was just so cool."

Some employers acknowledge their employees by posting an "Employee of the Week" picture on the wall. Others buy tickets for an employee to see their favorite celebrity. Recognizing what's important to people is vital. Buying tickets for Gabby, as well as her parents, is validating. Connecting with a bagger on his team is priceless.

Saying "Nice bike" means taking an interest in someone else through acknowledgment, honoring them by finding out what's important to them and making connections that move people.

Leading by example, Riley has trained his team to connect with each other and with the people they serve.

Nice bike, Dale Riley.

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