

Wanted: People Who Don't Care

"How about up there?" I asked.

"For a minute, I thought it might be in the right place," he said as he opened another inventory door for me.

That's all he had to do to clue me in that he was working for a company that needed improvement in some form. By his words and actions, he demonstrated that the store inventory was not in good order. I wanted to buy a desk lamp that was on display, but the one I wanted wasn't on the shelf in a box among all the other lamps. I couldn't find one so I walked around the aisles for a while until I finally found someone who worked there.

"How may I help you ma'am?" he asked with a smile.

"I'd like to buy one of the lamps on display, but I can't find one on the shelf."

"Let's see what I can do for you," he said in a very calming voice. He immediately struck me as someone who likes to help people—the type of person any CEO would want on their floor.

He looked at all the boxed lamps on the shelves, just as I did, but there was no lamp. Then he started opening doors on top of the shelves, looking at inventory numbers hand-written on the boxes. He opened two doors where the overstock inventory would logically be stored, just above the lamps, but none of the boxes had the magic number. I asked him to look in a few more nearby areas, and he agreed, saying that the inventory often wasn't in its most logical place.

He was an older gentleman, so I made the assumption that he probably had other jobs in the past.

"What did you do before you worked here?" I wondered.

“Social work, but I couldn’t take it anymore. Saw too many kids from families that have to choose between clothing or food. Then their school teachers failed them because they didn’t print out their homework on a computer. Some of those kids come from families who can’t even afford the electric to power the computer. So I started building computers for kids, on the side. Built 346 of them over the years, but finally burnt out. I worked day and night to try to help them, and never saw the state give a kid a computer so they could do their homework.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.” I started imagining that this man might not see his reward until he’s in heaven. “So what brought you here?”

“Just needed to do something different—something completely different.” He kept scanning the shelves.

“Have you ever made a suggestion to improve the inventory here?” I was baffled that such a major corporation was blind to their employees’ day-to-day frustrations. I was thinking that I should contact the CEO and ask him if he knows what kind of conversations are going on between his employees and his customers!

“Management doesn’t want to hear anything we have to say. Corporate sends us inventory whether we need it or not and we find a place to put it. Sometimes we have too much of one product and sometimes we’re completely out of another, but they’re not too concerned about it.”

“So you went from one organization that didn’t understand its customer to a company in a different industry who cares little for its employees and customers.”

“That’s right, but it’s easier to say ‘no’ to a customer with a car and a cell phone than to a kid who didn’t have breakfast or lunch.”

“Seems like you know something about quality and inventory management.”

“Yes, before the social work, I worked for a company that followed [Deming](#) principles.”

“It must be hard to walk around all day knowing how you can improve the business and the service to the customer, but have your hands tied.”

He nodded. “Everything I say here falls on deaf ears. Management doesn’t want to hear it. They tell us what to do and we’re supposed to obey.”

As an advocate for continuous improvement, I find this troubling on several levels. The company is missing out on great suggestions that could come from employees. I’ve never been given a customer survey at this store, so I imagine they’re also missing out on customer feedback. It amazes me that companies like this can stay in business for years, and this is a well known company with stores all over the United States! I definitely wouldn’t buy stock in this company, and I’m going to start paying closer attention to their competition, just to see how they stand up to their competition in the upcoming years.

We couldn’t locate the lamp in the store inventory or in their warehouse, so he sold me the display at a discount. Shouldn’t they have a better process for out-of-stock inventory, I wondered?

If you work for a company where top management wants to hear the voice of the employees and the customers, you are fortunate. If you later go to a company that doesn’t want your input, you will likely feel belittled and probably won’t want to stay very long. I’ve been in this store many times before and I didn’t see this nice, helpful man. I’m wondering how long he will last in this culture. Will this good worker burn out here? Will I see him here in a few months? In a way, I

hope I don't, because he deserves better. He's too smart and too nice to last in this top-down driven culture.

If you're in control of your business, but your business is going down, you may be able to capture ideas from your employees and customers to help turn it around. If you're interested in more ideas on how to continuously improve your business, contact [Dr. Lorraine](#) for a consultation. You don't know what you might be missing. If you're not careful, you may be running out of lamps. It's not easy to work in the dark!