

# THE PACKER

August 18, 2003

## Maybe film '9 to 5' wasn't so outrageous, after all

**H**AVE YOU EVER SEEN THE 1980 movie "9 to 5," starring Dolly Parton, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin?

The actresses play three secretaries who kidnap their boss for six weeks. While he's gone, they replace his rigid policies with innovations such as flexible schedules, job sharing, equal pay, and an on-site day care center.

The picture ends when the gruff Texas chairman of Consolidated Inc. descends, demanding to know how this office grew productivity by 60% in such a short period.

Aside from enjoying Dolly's country twang, I think this lighthearted movie contains a serious message: Corporate culture matters. Whether your atmosphere is stifling or stimulating, environment affects your employees' job satisfaction and performance.

A rule-bound, stiff-necked, and/or mediocre manager will hinder your staff from producing quality work. A first-class corporate culture is critical for breeding champions, increasing your competitiveness and better servicing your customers.

### Care about your employees.

Genuine concern for your workers is the foundation of a winning corporate culture. Your employees must know you care about them, period. No mission statement, core values list, or strategic planning session can compensate for a cold or indifferent attitude.

As your first priority, demolish any barriers — be they literal (e.g., closed doors) or figurative (e.g., a glass ceiling) — that isolate you from your work force. You must open the communication pipeline. Are you a manager who walks around and connects with your workers, or do you remain isolated in an ivory tower? Are you vocal with praise and "atta-boy/atta-girl," or do you only talk to your staff when a problem arises? Do you stay silent in the midst of challenges or crisis, letting bad news filter through the grapevine?

A first-class corporate culture is transparent, direct, friendly, and approachable. Bearing good news and/or bad tidings in person and head-on shows your employees that you value them both as professionals and as people.

Respect is a natural outgrowth of this caring attitude. The "golden rule" applies in business just like in kindergarten. Treat your staff the way you want them to treat you, and by extension, never ask your staff to do something that you would refuse to do yourself.



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### Be the best place for the best people to work.

Once you care about your work force, the next step is simple but powerful: Resolve to be the best place for the best people to work. How does this translate into daily office life? You decide. Perhaps it means that you will establish an aggressive plan to attract, hire and retain A players.

Perhaps it suggests that you should train and mentor your workers, ensuring that each one has the resources and skills to excel. Perhaps it calls for creative ways to bond with your team, be it through an off-site dinner or tickets to a one-of-a-kind event. Perhaps it implies that you should re-evaluate your incentive program and strengthen the tie between performance and pay.

Perhaps it says you should breathe life into a stuffy atmosphere by chucking the company rulebook (e.g., 8-to-5, Monday-to-Friday workweek) and letting your employees thrive (e.g., choose a more flexible schedule).

Whatever the path to excellence, make it happen. A sure recipe for mediocrity is a mind-numbing culture filled with middle-of-the-road workers.

On the other hand, since "birds of a feather flock together," a first-class culture contributes to a magnetic workplace that retains existing top talent and attracts even more A players.

### Set standards rather than making rules.

In a first-class culture, you trust your staff enough to set standards rather than making rules.

A skilled manager says "This is the bar you must cross" rather than "This is how fast you approach the bar ... This is how many steps you take to the bar ... This is how high you jump the bar," etc.

Let me illustrate this concept with an example from Dale Dauten's book, "The Gifted Boss." John Welker commanded a U.S. artillery battalion in Germany. When Welker took charge, he replaced the unit's two-hundred page procedure manual with a one-page list of standards.

Within a year, the army named Welker's battalion the best of its type in the world. Why? Because after laying down the definition of excellence, Welker stood back and let his troops determine independently how to achieve it.

Since this approach gives your employees free rein, they may even exceed your standards.

Recently, I watched a History Channel special on designing the stealth fighter. The Defense Department told two competing contractors to minimize the plane's radar signature.

One company produced a model that on radar appeared like a small helicopter; the other, Lockheed Martin, used cutting-edge geometry and unusual materials to generate a plane with the radar signature of an insect. Would the result have been so daring if the Defense Department had decreed the plane's exact appearance and construction, rather than setting a standard of success?

### Make your workplace fun.

Most of you who know me would agree that I'm a fun-loving person. I think fun also has a place in business: A winning culture is one in which people take excellence seriously without being too serious about themselves.

This last step is the easiest: Lighten up. Have you ever watched the Southwest flight attendants pitch peanuts down the aisle or heard about the Pike's Peak Fish Market workers who throw around seafood? These employees enjoy themselves, and as a result, they make their customers happy, too.

Toss a tomato at the next long-winded committee speaker or buy an office Mr. Potato Head — just don't forget to add fun to the recipe when you're mixing up a first-class corporate culture.

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