

SmartBusiness

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COLUMBUS

Smart Leaders

Thoughts on running a business

Interviewed by Abby Cymerman

JOHN NESS PRESIDENT, ODW LOGISTICS INC.

Several years ago, John Ness received a copy of Jim Collins' book "Good to Great" from a colleague and set it aside. Six months later, the president of Columbus-based ODW Logistics Inc. picked it up again and read it, setting in motion dramatic directional and cultural changes in his company. Ness says it took about two years for the benefits of the change to emerge, and by the second quarter of 2005, his business began to blossom. Today, the third-party logistics provider has 600 employees and projected 2006 revenue of \$45 million. *Smart Business* spoke with Ness about the importance of bonding with your team and why it's sometimes OK to be autocratic.

Be a people-oriented manager. Business and life are very dynamic. There are times when you've got to be very autocratic, take the lead and say, 'This is what we're going to do.' There are times when you have to be a referee in a healthy debate among your team leaders.

There are times when we have to cast the vision and say, 'This is where we want to go,' encourage, be persuasive and set expectations and goals. There are times when we've got to be supportive; we've got to let people work through issues and be a sounding board and a listening ear.

You've probably got to incorporate all facets of the styles that are out there. It's difficult at times to know what you need to bring to a particular situation, but experience tells you that.

Know your team. This year, we saved each other's lives, quite literally. I took two of my three senior team members with me on a mountain-climbing trip to the Grand Tetons of Jackson Hole, Wyo.

We spent a week in training for a mountain-climbing experience and three days on a mountain, where we were belaying each other using ropes and climbing techniques up the face of a 12,000-foot mountain. That drew us closer together than sitting around a conference room table.

There's a very blurry line between what goes on outside (the office) and what goes on at work. I'm not one that tries to forget what goes on outside; I really try to understand where people are coming from and what they're bringing into work each day.

I try to be a listening ear to get some perspective on where people's minds are because if their heart's someplace else, then you're not going to get their mind. Sometimes you've got to demonstrate a caring and compassion toward those issues.

Be a predictable boss. If I'm unpredictable and don't feel like I've got a healthy balance in my life and my job and a sense of understanding what my duties and responsibilities are, that all rolls downhill. It creates real challenges.

I try to keep an even keel, to hear where people are coming from and to be a consistent, pre-



dictable leader for our team.

If you've got a real clear sense of where you want to go and what you want to do, then you can present that vision in a way that hopefully people understand and buy in to it. Then your actions and the progress that you make each day toward that vision are consistent; you're coming in, working hard, giving it your all and getting the wins you need to make progress.

Keep your promises. Service is a promise that people buy. People deliver on promises, or don't deliver on promises, as the case may be.

So we talk frequently with our team here about delivering on those promises, and we ask our people to promise their best and deliver their promise. Our customers are going to measure us at the end of the day based on the promises and the commitments that we make to them when we enter into a relationship or when we commit to them that we're going to get their product where it needs to be on time.

Create an operating philosophy. We have a SCOPE format. This is the message that we carry to our team, and it's how we run our business. It stands for safety — it's an operating standard that we all live by that is not negotiable; customers — we

want to respond and delight; operations — it's focused on the people, productivity and their commitment to come in and do a great job every day; people — we're looking for folks that have the components of the team: spirit, hard work, competitiveness and results; and execution — we want to execute and execute profitably.

Any circumstance that comes up in day-to-day activity is going to come back to those foundational issues. You still have to have the expertise to figure out the technical process, apply the principles and consistency, but if you continue to remind yourself that that's your base, then those decisions become a little easier.

Present an attractive offer. You've got to provide a rewards system that is consistent with the individual's objectives and responsibilities. That's critical.

You've got to provide a complete package. If there's something that's not good, you've got to correct it.

Give employees responsibility. One of the key elements that has attracted people to our company is that they have had an opportunity to influence the outcome of their area of responsibility. It's powerful to people to make their idea reality and to take responsibility for a complete process.

They walk down the end of the hall into my office, and we talk about it. If it makes sense to me, we make the decision pretty quickly. I don't pull out 16 policy folders; we say let's do it.

The burden goes back onto that person to execute, and then my role is to follow up, encourage, check in, provide support and resources, and confirm that the results are consistent with what we discussed.

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