

TAILORING A LEADERSHIP STYLE TO FIT YOUR BUSINESS

BY ROBERT NITSCHÉ

THE PRESIDENT OF THE COMPANY WALKS THROUGH HIS OFFICE ONE MORNING. HE SEES ONE WORKER TEXTING, ANOTHER TALKING ON THE PHONE AND A THIRD TYPING AT HER COMPUTER.

He might wonder which one is hard at work. If he looked over their shoulders, he might discover that all of them are goofing off. Or he might find all three are toiling, each in his own way. In today's workplace, to choose one method of communication over another is like determining which of the three workers has the best hairstyle or desk decor. Who has the time or the will for micromanagement or authoritarianism?

Technology is creating more and more ways for people to talk to each other efficiently. What matters more than our different means of talking is how we transcend them, and the rest of our differences, so that workers can engage in efficient and effective communication.

As a lifelong worker who has done all jobs in our insurance agency, I have learned some truths that apply to many businesses no matter their size or type:

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS PARAMOUNT, AND INCLUDES LISTENING WELL AND KNOWING WHAT TO DO NEXT.

Employees need the ability to talk to people and the skill of listening with a critical ear. This is how we help customers identify their needs. We also must know how to change direction quickly. For example, a client may mention something in passing about what he is doing, such as taking the helicopter or company boat out to look at a project. Meanwhile, we did not know about the company-owned helicopter or boat. Good listening demands that we ask more questions about it, because our business is about helping minimize train wrecks.

ACCURATE INFORMATION IS CRUCIAL TO MAKING GOOD DECISIONS. In the workplace, we need the right information at the right time. And not only is getting information important—developing the ability to manage information overload is vital. We have many sources of information to wade through, so we must determine what is relevant to us, what is the most accurate and what is the timeliest.

TEAMWORK IS ESSENTIAL AND MUST FIT THE CULTURE. We are based in Giddings, Texas, population 5,500. We have a small-town culture, very personal. We deal with families and with people we have known all their lives. In a Dallas or Houston office, you will be talking to people in a different way. Employees have to be able to customize conversations to each small town, suburb or big city.

KNOWING THE BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND UP GIVES YOU AN EDGE. Picture a small country store where the kids do everything. That's how I grew up. In a small business, doing every job is part of doing business. My father first put me to work with the cleaning crew; I helped take out the trash. When I got older, I filed paperwork. Later, my dad said, "We need a picture and a diagram of the client's house." So I rode around town with a Polaroid camera. If I could get by the dog, I would measure the house and diagram it. Mom did the books, and so I helped her do that. I worked at the business until they got tired of me when I was in my teens. That was when I hauled around irrigation pipe in the heat of the summer. I learned then that education is a good thing. As my father said, and his father before him, "Your education is the one thing no one can ever take away from you."

SMALL BUSINESSES CAN BE GIANTS IN THEIR FIELD. We often hire people with little or no insurance experience. We teach them insurance. We work on building a strong team, and we have to search for the kind of people we want. We rank 200 in the United States out of 28,000 agencies in terms of revenue. We are at the top in Texas. One of the people I hired told me, “People don’t understand how good you guys are.” We are good because we work hard and because of the quality of our people. We don’t do anything really “out there,” but we do the basics well. We take care of our clients; that is our culture.

GOOD BUSINESS INCLUDES EMBRACING LEARNING AS A LIFELONG ACTIVITY.

It’s important to learn for the joy of learning, both in the office and out. I play golf to have a good time. I participate in martial arts for precision. I read. Lifelong learning can keep you fresh and invigorated in your field and can keep you from aging out of whatever you choose to do. Research, as well as a long line of famous and not-so-famous people who work well past what is considered conventional retirement age, show us that stimulating the mind keeps your brain healthy, just as physical exercise keeps the body working.

OPERATE FROM YOUR STRENGTHS AND RESPECT THE STRENGTHS OF OTHERS.

I like problem solving because I am good at it. I am a consensus builder. My father, who took over the business in 1971, was a sports star at Rice University. He has a liberal arts background; mine is business-related. He attended the school of hard knocks in business. I have a formal business education. We have rarely disagreed on what we need to do—just on how to do it. He is more of a “feel” player and uses his gut instinct. I will get a book and find the answer. But we are both very driven to find the answer, and we each have our own areas of expertise that we respect.

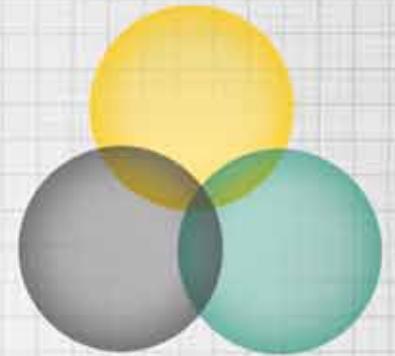
CULTIVATE AND NURTURE A SENSE OF HUMOR AND USE IT OFTEN. Our business is relationship-driven. We deal with tragedy on day-to-day basis, and we work with lots of family businesses. Many of our clients are also our friends. So maintaining a sense of humor is important to keeping a balanced perspective on life.

Although I believed at one time that I would work in the computer field, and came home in the summers from Baylor to work in the agency’s computer department before the days of IT, I made the decision to work with my father after two deaths in my family. Both my younger brother and my mother died in separate auto accidents, leaving only my father and me to run the business. I wanted to try this with my dad, and it has worked. We have tripled the size of the business.

But every business is different. It is a testament to running a family business in this country that you see healthy diversity. We see businesses that the children run totally, and some that the parents run totally. We see businesses that began as family businesses and will continue as something very different.

WHAT MATTERS MORE THAN HOW AN ORGANIZATION CHANGES IS THAT THOSE WHO MANAGE THE CHANGE FIGURE OUT WHAT WORKS BEST FOR THEM, AND THEN MAKE THAT WORK FOR THEIR CUSTOMERS AND CLIENTS.

If that’s the mission, it matters very little what means employees use to build their bridges to accomplish the work, whether it be phone calls, texting, email...or whatever new technology arrives next.



Robert K. Nitsche took over as CEO of Insurance Network of Texas, based in Giddings, Texas, in January 2011. The former CEO was his father, R.J. Nitsche, who arrived in Giddings in the 1970s to run what was then the Hannes Insurance Agency, founded in 1949.

Robert started working at his father’s agency as a boy. He has been a janitor, mailroom clerk, accounting department manager, computer systems manager and most recently was COO and CFO. He holds a BBA from Baylor’s Hankamer School of Business and an MBA from SMU. In 2010, he graduated from the Owner/President Management Program at Harvard University.

The independently owned Insurance Network of Texas offers personal, commercial and health benefits coverage. Today, the company has more than 150 employees at nine locations to service the company’s ever growing client base.