

Thirsting for Knowledge

By Ric Harry

In my travels across North America over the years, I have observed and documented the characteristics of people and companies to develop profiles. In particular, I look for companies that seem to be the most successful in their markets. We all have periods of success, but I am referring to the companies that seem to continuously rise to the top, even with ever-changing markets and economic conditions.

Success can be a broadly defined term, so, for the purpose of this article, let me define it to mean a workplace culture of optimism and progressive top-line growth with increased market penetration and stable human resources practices that yield sustainable, consistent bottom-line growth.

When I identify a company with this profile, I delve into what makes up the company: its people and, more importantly, its philosophies and practices. Some companies are profitable but do not possess the culture and specific outcomes I have defined. Some are unique, to say the least, and it is sometimes puzzling how they survive; but, for the most part, the majority of companies out there are like every other company.

There are several characteristics that most companies have in common, and virtues that each claims to exhibit better than others. The difference, however, is in the day-to-day belief and delivery of one particular discipline. Don't get me wrong—there is a long list of essential skills, knowledge, experience and virtues that most successful companies share, but there is one trait that I find sets the most successful people and companies apart.

The Biggest Difference

Having worked with large corporations and small family-run businesses, I have found that the advantages of each are equally compensated by comparable disadvantages, so size alone has not proven to set them apart in terms of success. The same can be said of the age of the company.

The location or market has little to no bearing, either, as I have

seen companies in hard water markets underperform companies in soft water markets. Even economy is not the critical difference, as I have seen companies in depressed markets with high unemployment outperform those in boom markets. These are all sound rationales for expanding in markets and driving growth, but they do not make the biggest difference.

The people make the company—specifically, people with a thirst for knowledge who apply the latest trends tend to be the most effective and successful in their markets. This is not just a top-down approach—in successful companies, all employees share a thirst to be current and competitive. Their commitment to

continued learning is the single unique driver and center of their success.

Training for Life

A thirst for continued learning is a critical component of becoming a leader in the market. Forward thinkers tend to be optimistic and embrace evolution, and learning and changing come with that. Consumerism is a fickle business. We need to be current with our skills, knowledge and practices.

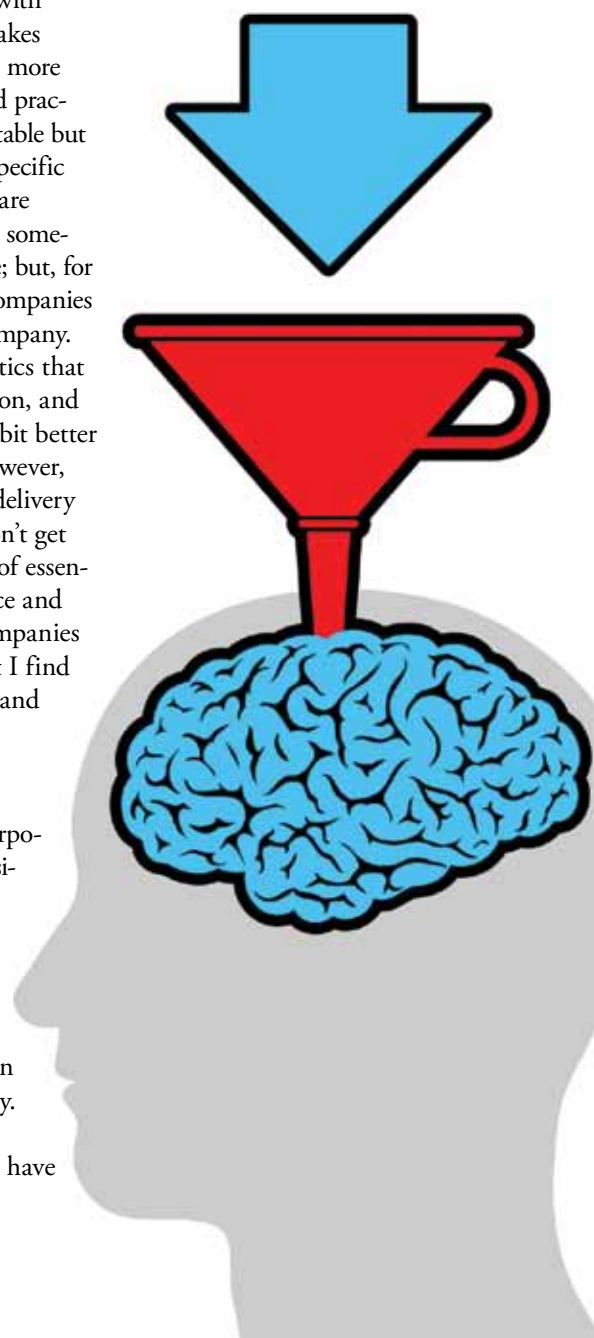
I am not talking about pursuing a Ph.D. or being a student in the traditional sense; I am talking about the conversations we have with our newest customers to thank them for their business, asking them why they decided to buy our products or services. I am talking about the meetings we have with our current employees or competitors, asking them why customers buy from them, what they are buying and what they think is important today. I am talking about the industry certification courses or seminars we attend and the self-help or inspirational books we read. Training—both initial and ongoing—is paramount.

It starts with a proper introduction. Regardless of experience, education, knowledge and background, a formalized process to integrate an employee into a new company or position is crucial to establishing a precedent and positive experience to assure that standards and expectations are met for all parties: the employee, the employer and the customer.

A clearly laid out, logical training plan with SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, tangible) learning goals will aid in aligning the employee with the company's objectives. This approach to initial training builds both confidence and competence, which are essential characteristics of effective people and companies. Furthermore, this is attractive to prospective employees, enhancing recruitment and job satisfaction.

Evolution is part of life and certainly part of business today, so we can either embrace change or be

A desire to learn drives
successful employees
& companies



subject to it. Nothing stands still or stays the same. Continued learning and development are what set the leaders apart from the rest. As our customers and markets shift, we must do the same to stay current and competitive.

In business today, we need to be competitive in all regards. We are either progressing or regressing; there is no middle ground or status quo. Considering inflation, attrition and evolving markets, it does not take long to fall behind in real-time consumerism, market trends or technology.

Gaining Confirmation

Many professionals speak of training or have books, DVDs, CDs, online courses, webinars and live training—which all are great starts. But without confirmation through application, these prove ineffective. We cannot learn to ride a bicycle without actually getting on it and riding it—opportunity, time, effort and resources are needed to practice the skills. The same is true of selling, servicing,

installing, marketing and managing.

Take a moment and think back to a time when you were learning a new skill or attending a course. Sure, it can be uncomfortable, but it is these brief moments of discomfort that help us grow.

Many people reminisce about these moments and consider them times they felt most alive and satisfied. It is this invigorating feeling that propitiates the thirst for continued development, personally and professionally, that results in success. You are reading this article, so congratulations—evidently you are already one of the learners quenching a thirst for success. If nothing else, I hope this article confirms what you already know. *wqp*

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