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Business Social Responsibility - Whose Job Is It ?

by Pam Watson Korbel

“Our lives begin to end on the day that we become silent about things that matter most.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King

In spring 1965 as I was raiding the kitchen for after-school snacks I found, to my great pleasure, a letter from my Uncle Tom Offenburger, who at the time was the Chicago bureau editor of U.S. News and World Report. It was a fat letter – seven pages, typed single spaced on yellow, onion skin paper. He had created carbon copies for each of my mother’s seven brothers and sisters.

Even though it was a long letter, my uncle proceeded to get directly to his point...he was leaving his position at U.S. News to become the press secretary for Dr. Martin Luther King. I re-read that paragraph, realizing then that the civil rights movement would impact many more people than I had originally thought. As, I read the entire 7-page letter, however, I was most impacted by the explanation that Uncle Tom offered for his job change. “As a single man with no children and after covering the poverty, dilapidated housing and poor schools in south Chicago, I am going to do something to make a difference,” he said.

Through the next few years, my siblings and I monitored all the news to keep up with Dr. King and my uncle, and when we proudly shared information about his work, the usual response was, “Is your uncle colored?” Ironically, he was a white man from a small Iowa town of 5,000 where being a minority equated to practicing Catholicism in a predominately Protestant community and registering as a Democrat in a Republican county.

As I grew older, I thought more deeply about Uncle Tom’s commitment to service and social issues. And, I was curious about how he was treated as a white man in the movement. Finally, in a conversation at his New York home after my college graduation, I could comfortably ask, “How did it feel to be in the minority? How did you get treated?”

He answered with a story....about the Poor People’s March in Washington in 1967. The organizers scheduled a planning meeting and sent a message that no white men would be allowed to attend. Immediately, Dr. King tried to change this decree. However, Uncle Tom prevailed as he convinced them that the purpose of the march was too important to waste time arguing over the presence of a white man at a planning meeting.

The march is history. The civil rights movement has evolved. In 1986, Uncle Tom died rather suddenly from heart problems. Still single with no children, our family chose to bury him in his hometown of Shenandoah, Iowa. Ironically, during the eulogies, one prominent civil rights leader stood before the crowd and said, “I did not trust Tom Offenburger when he joined Martin because he was white. However, Tom was always patient. Over time, I began to respect him because he stood for integrity and service. He taught me that together we can achieve so much more.” Now, my Uncle Tom is remembered as someone who did not become silent about the things that matter most.

The Case for Entrepreneurs to Take a Strong Role

And so I ask you: Have you created a life and a business that is about you or is it about us? How are you using your skills to provide service to humankind? And, are you standing silent about something that matters to you? As entrepreneurs, I am calling upon you to step up and provide more resources to the community for three reasons: 1) In this day of poor ethics records for corporations, small and mid-sized business owners need to set

an example of appropriate ethical leadership. 2) You will be a better employer if your company is community-minded. 3) Your company will attract more customers.

I will not bore you with more stats on the poor ethics of today's corporations. However, consider the number of community organizations that have lost corporate leaders as volunteers because of these issues. Who is going to fill the void? Owners, executives and managers from small and mid-sized businesses must step up.

Your business will run just fine while you spend time volunteering or serving on boards. Consider this example: A local car dealer turned down volunteer opportunities when he started his business because he did not have enough help. After five years of creating a profitable company, he was still turning down volunteer opportunities...because now he thought his employees could not manage without him. Then, a friend advised him to "get out" and force his employees to learn. He took the advice, and he proudly reports three years later that he doesn't "feel chained" to his company anymore. He serves on three community boards, volunteers at his children's schools, and raises money for the Chamber.

So, while you are away, will your customers move their business to your competitors? Probably not. In fact, the National Council for Community Relations did a study that shows that three out of four consumers will stick with a vendor that is contributing to the community, either financially or in volunteer hours. To make this strategy work, however, you do need to make your community contributions visible to your customers.

During the past three years, many of us have adjusted our thinking about abundance. As you embark on the new year, consider that your abundance includes more than wealth...it includes the time, passion and compassion. And remember that our community needs you during every month of the year, not just the holidays. By tying your business to the community, you will strengthen the relationships with your customers and employees....and make a better place for us all to live.