

Mission Ready

Volume 4, Issue 7

July 1, 2002

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Cultivating a Sense of Duty in Corporate America

The sad thing about the recent scandals involving a number of very prominent companies is that we, as a nation, are not scandalized. When we read of a CEO feathering his/her nest at the expense of the corporation, we accept it in much the same way as we would hearing about an associate “caught” for making too many personal calls on the company cell phone. We shrug our shoulders, as if to say “What’s new?” While most of us certainly do not approve of such actions, we generally consider corporate America to be, if you look closely enough, rather corrupt.

But it really wasn’t that long ago in our cultural history, when the company’s assets were considered a sacred trust—by the senior execs guarding the company’s funds, down to the secretary who wouldn’t think of using an office postage stamp to mail a personal bill; all were expected to be good stewards of the company’s resources. CEOs in those days enjoyed a certain amount of respect (as did politicians, believe it or not). Business leaders were characterized as dignified patriarchs and matriarchs of their organizations who were—if not always sympathetic to the needs of their employee base—at the very least duty bound to the board of directors. Loyalty was expected, and received, from the top down, from the senior executive down to the mail room clerk—both of whom were likely to remain with the company for decades.

The very suggestion that the modern employee has a fiduciary duty to his/her organization would be dismissed by many today as an old fashioned notion. The modern organization, after all, is not seen as particularly loyal to its employees—evidenced by massive layoffs—so, why should the employee feel loyalty to a faithless entity? In today’s era of the free agent, companies are plagued by turnover at all levels. Much of the turnover may be caused unwittingly by management itself, by focusing obsessively

on the short-term. The “corporate culture” is passed down through so many hands, so quickly, that it loses its distinct character. Even consultants advise their corporate clients not to expect loyalty from the workforce; loyalty must be bought with frequent perks, raises, and bonuses.

The authors of this newsletter can think of another organization—also faced with “turnover,” and populated by minimum wage employees—where a sense of duty is nevertheless cultivated. There is a sound reason why the Marine Corps took as its motto *Semper Fidelis*—Latin for “Always Faithful”—out of all the possible mottoes for such a rough and ready band of warriors. Loyalty and a sense of duty is the foundation for sustained excellence. Eighty percent of the Marine Corps serves only one four year tour of duty, while earning only about a thousand dollars a month; yet the organization will go to great lengths to inculcate its unique culture into all. A very high percentage of Marines, at every pay grade, feel a strong sense of duty while in uniform, and will go out of their way, in civilian life, to identify themselves as former Marines.

Creating a sense of duty is a managerial responsibility; and managers would do well to emulate the Marine Corps way. The corporate culture, once known and appreciated by all employees, will create a desire to protect it, and to make it flourish with increased productivity. Loyalty given will be reciprocated. And yes: a sense of duty—to the organization, to fellow associates, and to the customers—can be cultivated.

The sad histories of many a corporation now on the front pages of the newspapers would have been markedly different had *Semper Fi* been the company ethos.