

“Notes from the Corporate Underground”

By Kenny Moore

I'm tired of listening to Tom Peters. I refuse to buy Jack Welch's book. I've grown weary of reading the latest management guru's list of "Habits" and "Business Principles." I become depressed when I get to the part of the book that states: "...Get everyone together, tell them the business plan and demand that they believe and implement it fully." Then it quickly ends, with very little said on how to make this happen. I've started looking elsewhere for answers to my business needs.

The Story of Mr. Hatch

Of more help to me is "Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch" by Eileen Spinelli. It's a children's book about an isolated working man, who lives, works and sleeps alone. Neighbors say: "Mr. Hatch likes to keep to himself." One Saturday, while cleaning his porch, the postman delivers a heart-shaped box of candy with an anonymous note signed "Somebody loves you." Mr. Hatch is confused because he interacts with no one. He finally concludes: "Why, I've got a secret admirer." Mr. Hatch begins to change, dressing up and walking the streets of town, greeting and helping strangers - all with the hope of meeting the person who sent him the candy. Children are drawn to him. He bakes brownies, serves lemonade and plays an old harmonica that he's had from his boyhood. Everyone dances. Time passes. Mr. Hatch is having so much fun, he's even forgotten about finding his secret admirer.

Then, the postman returns informing Mr. Hatch that he delivered the candy to the wrong address and takes back the now-empty box. The "Somebody loves you" note falls out in the transfer, reminding Mr. Hatch that he was correct at the outset: nobody really does love him. He withdraws back into his isolation. But the kids won't have it. The neighborhood revolts: "We can't let this happen to Mr. Hatch" ... and they don't. Their response is truly prodigal. My seven-year-old son made me promise not to tell how it all ends, so go read the book. But the story left me thinking. What would happen if Mr. Hatch showed up in corporate America? What havoc might be wrought by small gifts, anonymously given to an ordinary worker - possibly even the wrong person? How might our corporate neighbors respond? I decided to find out.

A program is Designed

My plan was to anonymously send a \$40 floral arrangement to two unsuspecting employees every Monday morning - a Mr. Hatch Award. They would be subjectively chosen, sometimes based on their commitment to the corporate common good. Or because they just happened to be at the right place at the right time. Attached to the flowers would be a note: "Don't ever think your good efforts go unnoticed." Signed: "From someone who cares." The business world has taught me to always do a "pilot" before you jump into full implementation. I also learned that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission - so I kept the idea to myself and got no formal

approval. For my trial run, I picked one employee from the opposite side of my floor, as well as my Senior Vice President. While I personally hate anyone in authority, I notice that no one ever says "thank you" to executives. Granted, they do make mistakes, but they also do some good things - for which they seldom get credit. Besides, my therapist would be proud to hear me even consider doing something positive for someone in authority. So the S.V.P. got flowers too.

On Monday morning I walked down to the florist who handles our corporate account and asked what I could get for \$40. She showed me a small bowl with five petite flowers in it. (Their overhead must be high.) I told her I wanted to send two arrangements and to insure anonymity, I would pay cash and I would not sign my name or leave my phone number. The florist was extremely uncomfortable with this. I wasn't feeling too happy about the transaction either. Maybe this is how all pilot projects feel? By that afternoon, the flowers arrived. I said nothing to nobody. On Tuesday I made it a point to pass by the desk of the woman who worked on my floor. I said: "Hey, nice flowers. Is it your birthday?" "No" she said. "Somebody sent them to me. Look. Here's the note." By this time, all her co-workers were crowded around, telling me the layout of events. They also knew that an executive got the same flowers delivered. One of them even called the florist to find out who sent it. Nobody seemed to know. They all continued to speak in utter giddiness about the strangeness of the delivery and what made this woman so special. They also spent considerable time trying to figure out what she had in common with the executive, and who might have sent them both the flowers. Even as I left, they continued on in frenzied conversation and merriment.

A few days later I had a project-update meeting with my Senior Vice President. I planned to tell him about my "pilot" as well as get his reaction as a recipient. Before I even got to my part of the conversation, he said: "You know, Kenny, last week some employee sent me a bunch of flowers, thanking me for something I did. I'm not even sure who it was, or what I did. But it got me thinking. I only have a few more years before I retire and I think I'd like to use that time focusing on individual employees, their needs and concerns. I know it's impractical - we've got 13,000 of them. But I'd like to give it a try." Gulp! Now I felt both entrapped and embarrassed. How could I tell him that I sent the flowers ... or that he was only part of a program I was testing out? He had arrived upon a worthwhile executive goal that I wasn't going to knock off track. I kept my mouth shut, gave my project update and exited as fast as I could.

Pilot Review and Implementation

These two conversations made me want to continue my plans with Mr. Hatch. Even though the company knew nothing about the program, I believed they would support it. If I can give an employee a \$5,000 on-the-spot award for customer excellence, \$40 is not going to break the bank. The pilot even taught me a few lessons: 1 - run the program on my own and forget about formal corporate support; 2 - keep the anonymity of the program intact; 3 - ditch the corporate florist.

The next Monday I moved into full implementation. I chose two more workers, but didn't go to the swanky florist. I walked a few blocks North into the combat zone of downtown Brooklyn and found an all-purpose store.

The “proprietor” sells a lot of things, including flowers. I said to him: “Here’s my offer. Every week I want you to deliver two floral arrangements to my headquarters. I also want a “thank you” balloon attached along with a note that I’ll give you. You put the note in an envelope and deliver it all.” “OK with me” he says. “I’ll pay cash. You don’t contact me; I only contact you. I’ll show up every Monday with the names, notes and money.” Unlike the corporate florist, he had no problem with this arrangement. Apparently, he does a lot of his business this way. “One final question” I said. “What kind of flowers do I get for my \$40?” “Give me a minute” and he disappeared. What he brought back was a massive array of floral specimens: birds of paradise; tulips; roses; babies’ breathe. I think I got half of his storefront display. “Looks fine to me. Do a good job and I’ll keep coming back every week.”

The Results

It’s a year later and I’m still sending flowers, anonymous notes and balloons. My company still knows nothing about it. So, have I changed our corporate culture? No. Was I able to get everyone together, tell them the business plan and demand that they believe and implement the Mr. Hatch Award? Hell, no. But here’s what *has* happened:

1 - I actually look forward to coming to work on Monday mornings.

2 - A small number of employees go home Monday night with a smile or quizzical look on their faces.

3 - Co-workers are having a blast trying to figure out who’s sending flowers to their friends, what for, and how come. I suspect a few even dream of receiving flowers and a balloon for themselves.

4 – One aging executive is making retirement preparations by meeting individually with employees. While this is the least verifiable part of the program, I trust that the S.V.P. is making the effort. (Did I actually say that I “trust” someone in authority? Who knows, maybe Mr. Hatch is getting to me)

5 - I’ve got a “proprietor” in downtown Brooklyn who smiles when he sees me coming ... and warmly shakes my hand. I also have the feeling that the storefront area is a bit more “revitalized” that it was a year ago....

And that’s the present state of progress with the Mr. Hatch Award. I’ll probably keep it up until I read another kid’s book that leaves me feeling hopeful and alive. Then I’ll experiment with another idea. Maybe something based on “The Velveteen Rabbit” or “Ira Sleeps Over.”

I’m sure some well-meaning executive will read this article and try to formulate a corporate “Mr. Hatch Award.” Forget about it! Not everything needs to be imitated and mandated into business policy. Some things work just fine when they’re small, personal and unique. There’s organizational strength in fermenting a mixture of the institutional along with the idiosyncratic. Executives would be better served by encouraging staff to “hatch” their own ways of nurturing the corporate common good.

Oh ... one more thing. While I was finishing this article, I passed the woman who received the first Mr. Hatch Award when it was a pilot. She had fresh flowers on her desk. "Is it your birthday?" "No" she said. "Somebody still sending you anonymous flowers?" I whispered. "Nope, not this time. They're from my boss," she said. "I got promoted and she sent them as a present." "Sounds like you have a growing list of admirers..." I said, and walked away feeling a little renewed.

Who knows ... Mr. Hatch might start a trend in corporate America? I can hear Tom Peters talking about it now....

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P.S. If you're thinking about writing me, give in to the temptation. I love getting mail ... and being influenced by what you have to say. Please E-mail me at kmoore@keyspanenergy.com.

(Kenny Moore is a former monk and present-day businessman, improvising his way through the daily work-a-day grind. He's Director of Human Resources and Corporate Ombudsman for KeySpan. Kenny has survived "incurable" cancer and open-heart surgery - largely due to luck and Divine playfulness. Having dealt with both God and death, he now finds himself eminently qualified to work with executives on corporate change efforts.)

Bio

Kenny Moore is Director of Human Resources at KeySpan, a \$10 billion energy company with 13,000 employees. He is primarily responsible for awakening joy, meaning and commitment in the workplace. While these efforts have largely been met with skepticism, he remains eternally optimistic of their future viability. Kenny has experience with change management, leadership development and healing the corporate community. Most recently, he has been appointed KeySpan's Corporate Ombudsman. Reporting to the C.E.O., this position is responsible for insuring long-term implementation of corporate change efforts. Kenny is President of the New Jersey Human Resource Planning Group and has been interviewed by "Fast Company" and "The New York Times" regarding his unique efforts. His work has recently been profiled in Susan Skog's book: "Radical Acts of Love: How Compassion is Transforming Our World." His business practices are based on Louie Armstrong who said: "I am here in the service of Happiness." Louis died a rich and beloved man; his voice still rings in the ears (and hearts) of millions.

Prior to his work in corporate America, Kenny spent 15 years in a monastic community as a Catholic priest. Several years ago, he had the good fortune of being diagnosed with "incurable" cancer, at its most advanced stages. He underwent a year of experimental treatment at the National Cancer Institute and survived. Kenny came away from that experience recalling the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Most of us go to our graves with our music still inside us." Kenny's lifetime goal is to spend more of his time playing his music. Having dealt with both God and death, Kenny now finds himself eminently qualified to work with senior management on corporate change efforts.

Kenny is a watercolor artist and poet. He is founding director of "Art for the Anawim," a not-for-profit charity which works with the art community in supporting the needs of terminally ill children and the inner city poor. His poems have been published in several anthologies; one has recently been selected as a semifinalist in the North American Open Poetry Contest. Kenny lives in Totowa, N.J., and is married to the "fair and beautiful" Cynthia. Together, they are fighting a losing battle of maintaining their mental stability while raising two young boys.

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