



LEADING UPWARD



By Christina Salwitz

When I was coming up in retail through high school and college, I was trained at Nordstrom (when I thought I would go into fashion) that it was important to them that I not rely on asking for permission to do right by my customers.

They felt it was more efficient and effective if I used my good judgment, and if there was a problem, they would let me know. This is the standard for the service training they use to this day.

I took this message incredibly seriously and ran with it. I was not going to wait for a good, generous, tasteful, smart or benevolent manager to tell me what needed to get done. This entire strategy has served me well in every retail job I have had where both excellent and incredibly poor leadership reigned.

When this kind of insight isn't happening in a company, where micro-management feels like a necessity and squashes creative endeavor, do we blame the system? Blame the boss? Blame the customer or client? If the work itself is low quality, is it the customers' fault that we didn't get it right? If the boss doesn't see or reflect your genius, is that their fault? You are serving the customer and if THEY don't get it, well then, it's just too bad for everyone, right?

An Idea to Ponder: Leading Upward

We have all seen that leadership pyramid that shows the hierarchy of everyone involved in creating a successful work environment, right?

The employees and customers are on the bottom of the pile. But, what if we reverse this and the customers and employees are at the top?

Sometimes we see this called "Servant Leadership." It illustrates how direct the connect is between employees making decisions for themselves and the support structure of a great team below who uses good guidance and allows them to grow into even more valuable team players.

We can apply this thought to so many aspects in the garden center every day, whether it's creating a

pricing strategy or the best-selling mix of annuals for the upcoming season.

The largest group on our team interacts with our customers more than anyone daily. By utilizing this information, they are leading us from the bottom up.

A great designer gets great clients because they work every day to deserve and honor them. One of the ways they became a great designer was by coaching their clients to make good decisions, to understand they deserve to enjoy better taste, to understand their trained insight and to have the guts to back it with the right decision-making information.

That doesn't happen randomly. It happens when someone is leading upward.

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A successful manager gets promoted when they take the right amount of initiative, defers the right amount of credit (that's a HUGE one) and orchestrates success for themselves and co-workers. That success might happen despite (not because) of who their bosses are, and that's just fine because they're leading up.

In many ways, we get the clients and customers we deserve because we dumb down our ideas, our designs or our goals. If that's what is holding you back as a business owner or an employee, change the paradigm.

I know from experience over 25 years in retail nurseries, we have an astonishing amount of freedom at work. Not just the freedom to pitch our ideas and be "self-starters."

We have the freedom to quit, to find a new gig, to pick the clients/customers we're going to take on and to decide how we're going to deal with a request from someone who seems to have far more power than we do.

Saying "yes" always is one possible answer, but so is leading from below (leading upward).

Making It Happen

Creating a reputation and an environment where you OR the people around you are transformed into the bosses and customers you deserve is heady stuff and takes some practice.

At first, people around you might be puzzled and possibly jealous at your new enthusiasm for taking charge of your own destiny and that's OK. In fact, sometimes it wakes up those who never saw you as a potential leader before.

By setting about an intention to do this, it soon becomes a muscle memory and gets easier. But know this: You will run into those who are incredibly intimidated and un-nerved by your ostensibly powerless leadership, and it may seem impossible unless you are fully committed. Stick with it!

So how do you resonate with this daily?

- By being purposeful.
- By relating stories and research to those in charge to make your case.
- By demanding responsibility and not worrying about whether you have authority; that will come.
- By being generous with credit to others and embracing blame when it's due.
- Earn your rights in small steps daily.
- Gather, be organized, be eager to learn, be eager to teach, and lay the foundation for what you will earn. **LGR**

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