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Minds at Work:

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU HEARD A GOOD STORY?

Presented by Tim Geisert

HOST: Welcome to “Minds at Work”, where our job is to help your mind become inspired by your work.

I’m your host, Drew Hoffmeyer.

In today’s episode entitled, “When Was the Last Time You Heard a Good Story?” Tim Geisert, Vice President of Employment Branding at Kenexa and former University of Nebraska-Lincoln Adjunct Professor, speaks to us about the influence of stories at work. First he shares a story about an interesting stunt pulled at his workplace by senior leaders. Later he tells us about some of Henry Ford’s exploits. He finishes his piece with an explanation of how stories like these help define an organization’s culture.

TIM GEISERT: When was the last time you heard a good story? When I was younger, I had the distinct pleasure of working for what I thought was one of the best companies in the United States to work for. I was initially attracted to the organization because of the positive stories I had heard. For instance, during an interview, the founder of the organization was asked, “What’s it like to work in your company?” As a person with a dry sense of humor, he simply smiled and answered, “Well, it’s not too bad; it’s always warm in the winter and cool in the summer.” I will always appreciate the understated nature of the comment, because in reality, it was a great place to work and everyone knew it. He knew how to make light of everything, and in the high pressure, competitive, advertising business, that is what we needed from the boss, humor that diffused any tension. He was a very honest, ethical leader. All his employees wanted to do their best and work hard for him, and in turn, the organization. Consequently, for 15 years, the organization thrived. However, looking back, it was not the fact that we produced high quality work and exceeded the clients’ expectations that made it great, it was the stories that were created from the culture and the experiences. People loved to tell the stories of the place.

One experience that turned out to be a pivotal point in my life was when the senior management left one day suddenly for a cruise. They did not mention this vacation to the rest of the staff. In fact, the way we found out was from a note stuck to the front of the door. The note explained that they would be gone until Monday and that those in the office were now in charge. The note suggested we quickly pull together a meeting, elect an interim general manager and senior staff, and not break anything. What happened over the next four days became legendary in the history of the company. And in that brief time, careers were made and careers were ruined. They were the most interesting four days of my entire corporate life.

Employees, clients and competitors loved to share these stories. It made the place legendary, almost magical. Most importantly, it attracted the type of people we wanted to perpetuate that kind of legend. And it was fun. The place had great cultural brand. So what are your company stories? Does your company culture breed the type of stories that end up as organizational folklore? Have some of those great stories fallen by the wayside? If so, maybe you need to resurrect them, to create more of those kinds of stories.

Why do we need stories? Well, stories help us understand the deeper meaning of things that are sometimes hard to articulate. Stories help us understand a concept from our head’s perspective as well as from our hearts. To illustrate this, let me tell you another story. Years ago I served as an advertising agent for a large privately held bank. The owner was adamant about following protocol and displaying proper manners. Knowing how important this was to the culture, I invited my fellow agency partners to an etiquette seminar led by the bank’s corporate event planner. During that session someone asked, “Why does using these manners matter so much?” The question was answered by telling a story by the event planner.

According to legend from those who knew Henry Ford, he was a stickler for manners and etiquette, much like the owner of the bank, who was our client. Before hiring any senior executive, Mr. Ford would invite them to a nice dinner to observe how the candidate would conduct themselves. Watching every move and phrase the candidate made, Mr. Ford would determine if they were worthy of being a Ford Motor executive. On some occasions, Mr. Ford was so alarmed by the lack of manners, that he would abruptly stand up and walk away from the table, leaving the candidate stunned and embarrassed. As you might expect, it did not take long before the employees and prospects knew the expectations of the senior management, and especially Mr. Ford, at Ford Motor Company.

I believe this story teaches us two lessons. First, Mr. Ford was a stickler for detail, that's obvious. But moreover, a prospect's attention to detail had to be impeccable. Second, standards were very high at Ford Motor in those days. In addition, if any employee or prospect did not live up to those principles, the result would be a form of embarrassment.

The event planner who was conducting our session could have simply said, "Important bank customers have the highest expectations; therefore you should be knowledgeable about proper etiquette." Instead, she shared an example that had a lasting impact on everyone in that room and they could relate to them because of the purpose of the story. In fact, I related to it then, and here I am sharing with you years later.

The fact is, people love stories. It's a worldwide infatuation, where the motion picture industry has taken great advantage of it, a \$26,000,000,000 industry that proves my point. Stories create a connection with someone and something, including your company culture. The companies we work for provide us settings and plots for some of the best experiences in our lives, the good, the bad, and even sometimes the ugly. Each company culture has a story, so discover your organization's story. What is shared with people on the outside? Is it good, bad, fun or harmful? You may find that your organization is not known for having any stories and that might be telling in itself. Whatever the results, tell people a good story and your organization and your prospective employees are always listening.

HOST: We hope you enjoyed hearing today's episode, and thank you for joining us at "Minds at Work," where we offer you insight into becoming better employees, partners, parents, friends and neighbors. Visit our website at Kenexapods.com to find the original transcript of this episode or just to drop us a line. That's Kenexapods.com. This episode was brought to you by Kenexa, a leader in building the world's greatest workforces and serving humanity every day.

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