

leadership matters

BY MARK GORDON
MANAGING EDITOR

Uniform approach

While many styles of leadership can be effective, a 50-year Cintas Corp. executive, in looking back at what worked for him, relies on three 'C's: consistency, candor and communication.

Bob Kohlhepp prided himself on being an honest and fair leader throughout the 50 years he spent rising up the ranks of uniform giant Cintas Corp. But there were more than a few times that – with straightforward respect – he had to dress down some of its employees.

Like the time the company had reached maximum capacity at its plant in Houston. Kohlhepp asked the plant manager where he thought a new facility should go. The plant manager balked at even having a second site in

town, reasoning a second site would split the \$20 million business the original plant was doing in half — and cost some control.

The CEO of Cincinnati-based Cintas from 1995 to 2003, Kohlhepp

recounts the story with this manager in his 2021 book, "Build a Better Organization: How Effective Leadership and Strong Culture Can Create a High Performance Organization."

Upon hearing the manager's frustration, Kohlhepp, in what became a hallmark of his leadership at Cintas, pointed to the company's principal objective: "We will exceed our customer's expectations to maximize the long-term value of Cintas for its shareholders and working partners." That phrase formed the basis of the company's values-based book, "The Spirit as the Difference."

After chatting about the value of the second plant for customers, Kohlhepp pulled out the principal objective and asked the manager to read it. "Do you see your name in there anywhere?" I asked him," Kohlhepp writes.

After 30 seconds of "dead silence," the manager said no, he didn't see his own name in the principal objective.

Kohlhepp told the manager: "We're not making these decisions based on what's best for you or what's best for me or even what's best for (then-CEO) Dick Farmer. We're making these decisions based on what's best for all of our customers, all of our shareholders and all of our employees, which is what this principal objective says."

Kohlhepp, a part-time Naples resident, was the latest speaker at the NextGen Speaker Series event, held April 19 in Naples. (Naples boutique financial services firm Benson Blackburn is the series' founding sponsor.

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MIRROR, MIRROR

One of his favorite leadership tactics former Cintas Corp. CEO Bob Kohlhepp used at work was to remind people to "look in the mirror before you look out the window."

"Everybody who has ever worked for me can repeat that one," he says. "I always tell people, when something doesn't go right, the first place to look is in the mirror. 'What can you have done differently? What could you have done to change the outcome?'"

"The human tendency is to look out the window and think it's someone else's fault. But that's the worst thing in the world to do."

demarc partner is FGCU.)

Kohlhepp's straight-shooter leadership style obviously paid off. The company grew from a \$1.6 million business when he started in 1967 to a \$5 billion juggernaut when he retired as chairman in 2016. He was CEO for eight years, from 1995 to 2003, when annual revenue surged from some \$800 million to more than \$3 billion. Financial accomplishments aside, in his book and presentation, a Q&A with Benson Blackburn CEO Michael Benson, Kohlhepp credits The Spirit book that defined the Cintas Way as a bedrock achievement.

"Some people read the book and thought, 'I really like this company; I want to be part of it,' while others read the book and thought, 'Man, you guys are a bunch of weirdos,'" Kohlhepp says. "And for those who (thought that), we didn't want them to work for us because they weren't going to be a culture fit."

PAINT A PICTURE

Noting that he's worked with and for

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BY JENNIFER M. FOWLER | BOARD CERTIFIED LABOR & EMPLOYMENT ATTORNEY



HURRICANE SEASON IS HERE: UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE PAY DURING AND AFTER A HURRICANE

With the onset of the 2022 hurricane season, employers should finalize their hurricane preparedness plans soon. A well-done hurricane preparedness plan will address a host of issues, including but not limited to: preparing facilities for severe weather, ensuring the business is properly insured, determining whether a business will stay open, and if the business stays open, how it will be staffed. At some point, after decisions have been made about whether a business will stay open and whether goods or people need to be moved out of harm's way, questions related to employee pay tend to arise.

One frequently asked question is, "Should I pay exempt employees who miss work due to bad weather conditions?" An exempt employee is someone who is not entitled to overtime pay for hours worked over 40 in any workweek. When it comes to deductions from exempt employees' salaries, it is easy to get into trouble. The general rule is that exempt employees are entitled to receive their entire salaries for any workweek in which they perform work. This means that if the work site closes for a partial week due to bad weather conditions (such as a hurricane) and the exempt employees have worked during that workweek, those employees are entitled to their full salaries. However, if the employer has a leave benefit, such as PTO, and the employees have any leave remaining, the employer can require its employees to use paid time off for any time the employees are away from work. If employees do not have any remaining leave benefits, they must be paid.

If the work site remains open during inclement weather and any employees are absent (even if due to transportation issues), those employees can be required to use paid time off. If the employees do not have any paid time off remaining, employers may deduct a full day's absence from those employees' salaries. For a more detailed explanation, please visit www.dol.gov.

Other payroll issues that arise during and after a storm generally relate to what constitutes compensable time for non-exempt employees. The FLSA only requires that non-exempt employees be paid for the hours they actually work. However, those non-exempt employees on fixed salaries for fluctuating workweek(s) must be paid their full weekly salaries in any week during which they worked. Further, those businesses, such as hospitals and nursing homes, that remain open during a storm and require employees to remain on-site during the storm may have to pay those employees who are required to be on-site during a storm for all the time they are at their employers' place of business, as they may be considered to be "on call."

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GOOD VIBES

A leadership concept longtime Cintas Corp. executive Bob Kohlhepp grew to use often in his career is positive discontent, an idea from management guru Peter Drucker.

“What that meant to us, nothing we do is as good as it needs to be,” Kohlhepp says. “No matter what product we have, how can we make that product better? No matter how good an employee is, how can we make that employee better?”

“But do it in a positive way. Negative discontent is people telling us what’s wrong without telling us how we fix it. If you have the mindset that everything could get better, it’s amazing what could happen.”

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both good and bad leaders, Kohlhepp developed a nine-point list of the characteristics of great leaders over his Cintas career. The list includes:

- **They are visionaries:** This is what the business will look like in five years. In his talk and book, he equates being a visionary to a puzzle box — the picture is the vision. “Imagine how much more difficult it is to work on a jigsaw puzzle without the picture on the box,” he says. “The leader’s job is to paint the picture on the box.”

- **They are motivators:** Kohl-

hepp’s model for being a motivating leader is to be tough but empathetic and to take the blame when things go wrong while handing out credit when things go right. Those actions, he says, motivate people through doing and showing.

- **They attract followers:** The first step here is to explain the vision with clarity, so “people know what’s in it for them,” he says. “What will they get out of working extra hard? It can’t be only that the company will be more successful.”

- **They are good communicators:** Kohlhepp calls this absolutely crucial. “You don’t talk to people at the board meeting like you talk to people on the plant floor,” he says. “But you need to know how to talk to both of them.”

- **They earn trust and respect:** The key to this characteristic is living by a do-what-you-say-you-will-do ethos. A good-sized piece of humility helps, too. “Earning trust and respect requires that you be willing to do anything you ask others to do,” he writes. “Said in reverse: Never ask anyone to do something you wouldn’t be willing to do yourself.”

CAN DO

They are flexible: The best leaders, writes Kohlhepp, have a “willingness to listen, to hear all ideas.” And “they know that the only way to find great new ideas is to ask for them and then listen. Leaders want to hear what everyone has to say, not just a small group.”



MICHAEL BENSON talks with BOB KOHLHEPP at a NextGen Speaker Series event in April.

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In the presentation, Kohlhepp talked about not only being flexible to new ideas from new sources, but to also remember that a company’s level of innovation is based on how many things it’s willing to try. “Thomas Edison invented the light bulb on his 676th try. If we cut him off at No. 500, we’d be out here with candles and flames,” he quipped.

They exude enthusiasm and confidence: “Good leaders have a can-do attitude and positive energy,” Kohlhepp writes. “They rarely have a bad day or display a bad outlook.” Another key? Good leaders, says Kohlhepp, feel positive about their own abilities and

those around them — they don’t start something with a can’t-do outlook.

They set high expectations and standards: Kohlhepp considers feedback used to drive and motivate employees to meet and surpass big goals a foundation of his success. He also says providing direct and honest feedback is one of the toughest things most managers and leaders face in their careers. Tough — but essential.

“You have to tell people what a good job looks like, and then you have to give them constant feedback about how they are doing,” he says. “Feedback is absolutely essential. It has to be immediate. You shouldn’t

wait until next week to tell someone they did a good job. You should tell them right now. And if someone isn’t doing something right, you should tell them right now, too. And you never criticize the individual. You criticize the behavior.”

They have honesty and integrity: Great leaders, says Kohlhepp, “are committed to making the right decision, whether it’s the popular one or not.”

“True leaders never mislead anyone or lie to them,” Kohlhepp writes. “You’ve heard that honesty is the best policy — well, I say honesty is the only policy.”

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