



Recommit to Your Business

How to define your place in a changed market. **BY JOHN P. PALEN**

WHY WOULD A BUSINESS OWNER make changes that result in a 50 percent turnover in staff and management? It's this kind of balancing act that I see owners and leaders performing as they come to terms with the shift in business goals and results.

Let me introduce you to one company that is coming into balance after some difficult and, might I say, brutal strategic changes to its business practices. Just before signs of the recession appeared, CEO Jeff Dougherty of Aquarius Water Conditioning recommitment to his business by setting a goal of becoming a world-class organization. He not only wanted it, he called a company meeting and declared it.

It's not that business was bad. Jeff just believed that they might be missing opportunities they didn't know existed due to informal service and sales pro-

cesses. Then came the hard part. He took the painful steps to define and implement a world-class organization and to create a corporate culture that "earns the right to be recommended."

"Our mission and tagline is to earn the right to be recommended," Dougherty says. "In order to accomplish this, everything we do, from the way we answer the phone, conduct ourselves while in the customer's home and handle all sales and service related activities in our corporate office environment, must reflect a culture that earns the right to be recommended."

Writing a one-page business plan, Dougherty and his leadership defined their mission and core values and what it would take to be recommended. Taking feedback from current and prospective clients, the

company moved from department to department and restructured processes and professional expectations to meet their new world-class definition.

For example, when a service technician arrives at a customer's home, a red carpet is laid at the door, the technician wears shoe covers and asks the customer if the service vehicle is parked in a good spot. There is a protocol for introduction and respecting the customer's home that is consistent and measurable.

In the same way, customer service handles calls in a specific manner and ensures that each customer has a follow-through process and is supported to their satisfaction. Salespeople are trained to follow through on any accounts that technicians have deemed interested in additional services.

"We defined specific, measurable criteria for

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quality and efficient performance, so service technicians, salespeople and all employees can review results on a daily basis and be accountable for following them," says Dougherty.

These ground-level changes took about six to eight months, and in that time many people decided that the changes were not for them. "I told my people from the beginning that we as an organization are going to change," explains Dougherty. "Either you will be committed and excited about making necessary change, or I will support your need or decision to find another place to work that

is a better fit for you. We increased our daily communication about expectations and results, and those who were on board made it an exciting and fun environment."

The company carried on through the changes and has realized an uptick in sales, improved margins and an expansion of their locations in the region. They had a grasp on their timeline and action steps needed to fulfill new strategic goals.

Has the transition been perfect? I think Dougherty and his leaders would call their pursuit a work in progress, but this fourth-generation en-



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trepreneur is finding that people seem happier in their work and united in a common goal like never before.

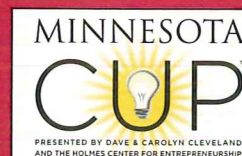
"There is more energy. People like the new environment and the clear expectations. And we celebrate successes more often as we meet and even exceed objectives."

If your business seems stuck in no-man's land about its mission or place in the market, it may require some bold action to redefine and recommit to the realities now, rather than wishing for what once was. Your talent needs to know that leadership has the reins and is working one step at a time to build a business that can compete for years to come.

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