

Retail Leadership: Humility

I spent a long Labor Day weekend hanging out at the beach with my family and some very good friends. During one conversation my friend Mark asked me what quality I believe a retail executive absolutely must have in order to be successful. I thought for a moment and said that while I wasn't sure I could nail down one quality that makes someone successful, I do know what quality I most respect in successful retailers. Humility.

I have met some retailers who were brilliant, but their ego constantly got in the way of their success. That's putting it mildly. Some were incredibly arrogant. But I have had the privilege of not just knowing but also working for incredibly brilliant and humble leaders. To be a humble retail leader is to not only set your own ego aside, but to show concern and compassion for your employees. It means to be authentic with every employee you engage with, from other executives to the new part-timer.

Successful retail leaders don't need to be the face of success but they enable others to be successful. They understand that the day is won or lost on the retail sales floor, not in the office or the conference room. They understand that while the right strategy is key, without the right execution it is all for naught. They understand that when they visit stores that their job is to ask questions and, even more important, listen to the answers. Successful retailers understand that it's not about them, it's about the customer. They also understand that the way to serve the customer is to serve the employee. And they know that it's more important to understand than be understood.

As a retail executive myself I made plenty of mistakes. I had to hear from others how something I said or didn't say hurt someone. I had to learn that the more responsibility I had, the more my personal contributions were moved to the background. I learned that the bigger the retail organization got, the more visible I needed to be. I also learned that the more visible I became, the easier it would be to become full of myself. Fortunately, I had - and still have - people in my life who will let me know if I'm in danger of allowing that to happen.

Leaders must balance confidence with humility. People expect leaders to have the answer. They expect leaders to show the way. People put their trust in them, so leaders must not only be confident but they must look confident. The difference between confidence and arrogance lies in how the leader interacts with the people she is leading. Again: Leadership is as much about as how we act as it is about what we know. Peter Drucker once said, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." Our role is to do both.

About the author: Doug Fleener is a veteran retailer with over 30 years of hands-on retail experience with world-class retailers including Bose Corporation and The Sharper Image. He has also owned and operated his own specialty stores. As the Director of Retail for Bose Corporation, Doug was instrumental in developing the unique and engaging retail methods that have become the industry's benchmarks for experience based retailing and superb customer service.

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Doug is now president and managing partner of Dynamic Experiences Group LLC, a Lexington based retail consulting firm dedicated to helping retailers create unique customer experiences that results in higher sales and profits. Learn more at www.dynamicexperiencesgroup.com or call Doug at 866-535-6331.

Fleener also shares his knowledge of experience based retailing in a series of custom key notes and workshops designed for stores, businesses, corporations, non-profits, and trade associations of all sizes. His casual style and quick wit make him not just a crowd pleaser but also an incredible motivator, encouraging people to take action and deliver extraordinary experiences to customers and employees alike. Learn more at www.dougfleener.com.