



Judgment on the Front Line

How Smart Companies Win By Trusting Their People

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Why are frontline leaders the key to success in organizations like Google, Amazon, Zappos and the Navy SEALs? It's simple: those employees are your most valuable source of customer knowledge and creativity.

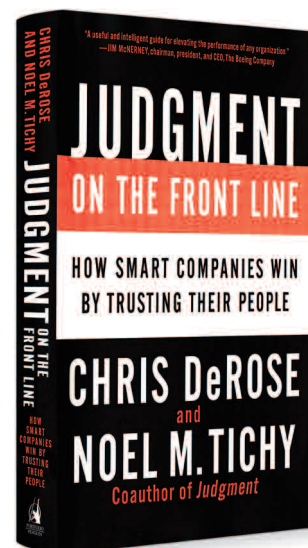
Management experts Chris DeRose and Noel Tichy have spent years partnering with CEOs as they tried to transform their organizations, which often entails working with leaders from top to bottom to help thousands of associates align with the organization's vision.

Unfortunately, as DeRose and Tichy explain, most organizations don't tap in to the knowledge, creativity and experience of the vast majority of their staffs. Despite the many leaders who claim that "people are our organization's most important asset," few have developed methods for systematically learning from those on the front line. Even fewer know how to give frontline associates a useful tool kit for problem solving and innovation.

Judgment on the Front Line shows how to build a front line-focused organization. DeRose and Tichy offer a five-step process that helps leaders identify how to generate dynamic customer innovation at the front line, and they give powerful examples of frontline leadership in action.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why frontline employees are so important to organizations and why it is crucial to involve them in decision making.
- A five-step process for building a frontline-focused organization.
- Methods of frontline employee development from the corporate, military and medical sectors.



by Chris DeRose
and Noel M. Tichy

CONTENTS

The Frontline Innovation Factory

Page 2

Building the Front Line-Focused Organization

Page 3

Starting at the Top

Page 4

Teaching People to Think

Page 4

Breaking Down the Hierarchy

Page 6

Investing in Frontline Capability

Page 7

Corporate Citizenship on the Front Line

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: JUDGMENT ON THE FRONT LINE

by Chris DeRose and Noel M. Tichy

The authors: Chris DeRose has consulted and taught around the world, including executive education at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. Noel M. Tichy is the author of *Judgment, Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will* and other business best-sellers. He is a professor at the Ross School.

Judgment on the Front Line: How Smart Companies Win by Trusting Their People by Chris DeRose and Noel M. Tichy. Copyright © 2012 by Chris DeRose and Noel M. Tichy. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Portfolio/Penguin, 288 pages, \$26.95, ISBN: 978-1-59184-388-7. To purchase this book, go to www.amazon.com or www.bn.com.

Summary copyright © 2013 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® www.summary.com, 1-800-SUMMARY.

For additional information on the authors, go to www.summary.com.

Preface

In the United States, at least one-fifth of the entire workforce might be classified as frontline employees. In fact, retail and service workers alone total more than fifteen million people. These associates are experienced in the ways of customers, square off against the competition each day and have insights into where the machinery of their organization consistently breaks down. Yet most organizations do little to learn from these wise workers or expand their ability to deal with the complexities they face. We don't see many company leaders who tap into more than a tiny fraction of the knowledge, creativity, and judgment of their largest group of employees. ●

The Frontline Innovation Factory

It was Greg Linden's fondness for candy that led to his first major innovation at Amazon, as he recalled that in supermarkets, customers often find candy, potato chips and other "impulse buys" on the racks directly adjacent to the checkout lines. Why not personalize recommendations for similar impulse buys based on the items in a customer's virtual shopping cart as it approaches checkout?

When he started running it by colleagues for review, he garnered mostly positive reactions, with the important exception of a senior vice president of marketing, who "was dead set against it." As Linden later recalled, "his main objection was that it might distract people from checking out." Linden was expressly prohibited by a direct superior from proceeding with the project. However, Linden notes that at Amazon, "even for top executives, it was hard to block a test. Measurement was good. The test rolled out."

The results of the test were clear and irrefutable. Not only did the online test succeed, but the feature was so profitable that not having it live was costing Amazon a noticeable chunk of change. Linden's virtual shopping cart experiment could have only succeeded and been widely implemented under the aegis of a CEO who created a culture where experimentation and adoption was the norm as opposed to the exception.

The Turtle Tank

During the course of our clinical work many years ago, a manager of a retail branch in San Diego known for innovation and employee engagement shared an instructive lesson. He told us that if you buy a young turtle and put it in a small aquarium, it will only grow to a size that fits the tank. We looked into this. Not only is it true, but it is also a practice that infuriates animal rights advocates. Unfortunately for the turtles, the practice stops their growth, leading to health issues and an uncomfortable living environment.

So what do turtles have to do with frontline workers? As this manager shared with us, most organizations where he had worked earlier in his career had boxed in their employees with rules, bureaucracy and hierarchy that stunted their personal growth and organizational contribution. Those at the top of the organization not only failed to ask for ideas but were often dismissive when frontline employees generated suggestions. When middle managers and senior leaders claim that frontline leaders lack the necessary strategic context or see criticism of their organizational processes as resistance, this behavior has the same effect as the turtle tank.



1-800-SUMMARY
service@summary.com

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 500 Old Forge Lane, Suite 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2013 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®.

Available formats: Summaries are available in several digital formats. To subscribe, call us at 1-800-SUMMARY (240-912-7513 outside the United States), or order online at www.summary.com. Multiple-subscription discounts and corporate site licenses are also available.

Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor In Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; Corbin Collins, Contributing Editor

People: The Most Ignored Asset

The mantra “people are our most important asset” is commonplace today in business circles. You can find it in so many annual reports and press releases that it has lost all of its original meaning. Yet few companies have absorbed the primary lesson: You can learn from the workers who are closest to problems and interact with customers on the front line every day. While many organizations frequently invoke the mantra of “customer-centricity,” most don’t pay enough attention to those who are closest to the consumer.

The Organizational Paradox: Control Versus Creativity

It is the paradox of all organizations that they require control yet succeed most spectacularly when they unleash the imagination and energy of their employees. The even more painful paradox is that companies that feel compelled to impose obsolete command-and-control protocols in an attempt to tightly govern the actions of frontline employees are actually running an even greater risk: Frontline workers will fail to provide these organizations with the information, wisdom and judgment required to solve problems and meet their customers’ ever-changing expectations.

Changes in consumer behavior, a generational swing in employee attitudes and the growth of social media have all contributed to an erosion of command-and-control organizations. In their place, organizations that emphasize decentralization and collaboration are rising in order to more nimbly respond to consumer needs. Those who embrace these changes and learn from their front lines are able to create a virtual factory of new ideas and innovation. ●

Building the Front Line-Focused Organization

In a front line-focused organization, senior leaders have five primary responsibilities:

- **Define a Customer-Based Vision.** Set the vision and define a customer-based strategy for the organization. These judgments are not just passed down from the mountaintop but must reflect observations, feedback and learning from the field. Senior leaders must mobilize organizational expertise to craft a customer-value proposition that matches the product and service capabilities to what the organization can deliver.
- **Develop a Front Line-Focused Culture.** Leaders must deeply care about the opportunities their organiza-

The HiPPO Corollary

The fact that many organizations commonly suffer from turtle-tank syndrome can be readily explained by the HiPPO corollary. HiPPO is a term originally coined at, appropriately enough, Amazon, that stands for “highest-paid person’s opinion.” In most organizations, people reflexively bow to the HiPPO or forsake their own opinion because they do not have the ability to override the HiPPO. This is a direct outcome of the hierarchical organizational construct that assumes intelligence and capability are related to a person’s job title. Fortunately for Greg Linden, as we saw in the previous story, Amazon is a company that values data and customer insight over intuition. As a result, his shopping-cart experiment prevailed despite the marketing vice president’s (i.e., HiPPO’s) opinion that it was not worth pursuing.

tion affords frontline employees, and they must sincerely respect the importance of their insight. They are hierarchically positioned to embed values and model leadership behaviors that ensure their organizations actively consider the needs of those on the front line and learn from their experience.

- **Obsess over Talent.** These leaders know that they will win only by having the best talent and the right kind of leadership at the customer interface. They are hard-nosed about the recruitment and hiring processes, never content to leave these solely to HR’s discretion. They ensure that training and support systems are in place to teach newcomers how to be successful with customers.
- **Define the Judgment Playing Field.** These leaders define the boundaries for employee decision making, clarifying when frontline leaders can act autonomously and which issues are outside of their authority. Senior leaders ensure that employees are equipped with the right resources to make good judgments.
- **Live on the Line.** Leaders need to go where the action is. They must interact with workers at the customer interface to understand whether the front line feels capable of executing the strategy. Are individual employees committed? Are we incorporating all of our knowledge about customers? Are we providing our employees the right tools, resources, and work environment?

There is a five-step process for leaders to build or, more likely, rebuild their companies from the front line so that the ingenuity, innovation and emotion of thousands of employees can be harnessed. The steps are:

Summary: JUDGMENT ON THE FRONT LINE

• **Step 1. Connect the Front Line to the Customer.** The CEO and senior team have three fundamental responsibilities in step 1: Understand changing customer needs based on feedback from customers and employees. Ensure that the organization's capabilities match the customer promise. And connect the front line to delivery and improvement of the customer value proposition.

• **Step 2. Teach People to Think for Themselves.** Employees must be taught how to make the right customer-friendly judgments while protecting the business's long-term health. Step 2 requires continuous teaching and discussion of how judgment is applied in actual situations. Teach everyone deeply about customer needs and basic business math. Couple organizational values with a problem-solving framework that can be used by frontline employees and coached by their leaders.

• **Step 3. Experiment to Implement.** Employees can be encouraged to innovate entirely new solutions. Define the innovation areas (products, services or business processes) where frontline innovation is desired. Explain how employees work with others in the organization to generate, review and select innovation ideas for implementation. Provide a methodology for experimentation and measurement.

• **Step 4. Break Down the Hierarchy.** Invigorate the change process by resetting the organizational context. Senior leaders must actively diminish the detrimental aspects of hierarchy — disrespect, intimidation and oppressing opinions — through the careful use of language, symbolism and open discussion of role expectations.

• **Step 5. Invest in Frontline Capability.** Select candidates rigorously and in alignment with the values and customer expectations. Develop frontline judgment capability through an immediate and sustained investment. Teach leaders of frontline associates how to be effective in their critical roles. ●

Starting at the Top

David Novak is chairman and CEO of Yum! Brands, parent company of KFC, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut. Yum!'s 1997 spin-off from PepsiCo created one of the biggest opportunities ever for a “corporate do-over,” as Novak likes to refer to the raft of changes he instituted over the years since he took the helm. Saddled with nearly \$5 billion of debt and annual returns that had lagged both the market and the industry, the newly formed company's restaurants operated as three independent competitors more than as corporate allies.

When Novak and his leadership team set out to remake the company, their first goal was to consistently treat those who serve the customer — the restaurant managers and their teams — as the most important people in the organization.

His ultimate goal was to have employees intuitively and reflexively take care of the customer and resolve any possible complaints — “to actively try to make them feel welcome and happy eating in one of our restaurants.” Novak began to formulate a Teachable Point of View: “People capability first ... Satisfied customers and profitability follow.” The laser focus and intensity would be directed at creating “Customer Mania” with the singular employee passion of putting “a yum on customers' faces around the world.”

The Frontline Judgment Playing Field at Yum!

Yum! didn't afford its restaurant teams the freedom to play with store design, product offerings or operating processes. The primary focus of frontline employees' judgment has been ensuring a fantastic customer experience. Yum! also changed the titles of all senior managers to “coaches” instead of referring to them as “bosses.” Yum! fundamentally restructured reporting relationships and spans of control to ensure that area coaches and regional coaches actually had time to work with people in the restaurant.

“The greatest driver of the results we've achieved is the recognition culture we have created. This is creating a highly spirited work environment that is serving as a magnet to retain and recruit the very best talent. The fact is too many corporations are cold, impersonal, detached from the front line and, frankly, boring.”

Yum! gave every employee the power to spend up to \$10 to resolve any conflict or service issue. In truth, employees exercise intelligent discretion and rarely use the \$10 allowance. Today, not only are Yum! restaurants run so efficiently that there are fewer disgruntled customers, but the considerable investment in employee training has resulted in frontline workers who are able to listen and resolve problems amicably without frequently resorting to compensation. ●

Teaching People to Think

Whereas a restaurant crew member at Yum! has to contend with relatively predictable customer needs, frontline personnel in other industries must deal with more variables and higher degrees of unpredictability. The example of the U.S. Navy SEALs demonstrates

how organizations teach their frontline workers to think about multifaceted problems.

For, the SEALs, the solution lies in:

1. Anticipation of the types of problems frontline employees are likely to face.
2. Repetitive training to develop judgment.
3. Lower risk opportunities for people to practice again and again.
4. Contingency planning in case things don't go as expected.

Seventy percent of recruits come to SEAL training directly out of high school. SEALs are trained to operate in the field semiautonomously, with limited direct communications and maximum latitude to make life-and-death, real-time judgment calls at the front line. Decisions made by SEALs have significant geopolitical ramifications.

How SEALs Develop Judgment

The rough training program culminates in an exhausting ordeal known as Hell Week, during which candidates must function on a maximum of five hours of sleep — in a week, not a day. This trial by fire prepares recruits to make tough judgments on the front line by instilling a sense of confidence, courage and commitment in each candidate.

SEALs are taught to consider situational ethical issues, such as what to do when taking hostile fire from what appears to be a 14-year-old girl armed with an assault rifle. The SEALs also mentally prepare for judgment calls they may face tactically in the heat of battle. In many situations a SEAL faces, there is no right answer. This training regime emphasizes the ability to think under pressure, weigh options, evaluate consequences and take action.

It may sound strange, or even condescending, to imply that adults need help learning how to think. After all, cognition is part of what defines us as human beings. However, individual thinking styles emerge as a function of experience, education, environment and many other factors. Organizations that offer shared frameworks, methodology and models for problem solving take an important step toward promoting nonhierarchical dialogue that focuses on using the best available information — much of it from the front line. It is critical that training affords the opportunities to practice making such decisions under stress and teaches frontline employees how to develop contingency plans. ●

Experiment to Innovate on the Front Line

A hackathon is a 24- to 48-hour Red Bull-infused programming fest featuring around-the-clock highly technical work aimed at taking nascent ideas and turning them into prototypes of new products in real time. It has become an integral part of Facebook's culture. Such Facebook features as the iPhoto plug-in, Facebook Chat and video messaging all started as hackathon projects.

At Facebook, hackathons are emblematic of the company's deeply experimental culture because they:

1. Focus on Impact. The ultimate goal of a hackathon is to produce something that actually works. This is an opportunity for programmers and developers to scratch that creative itch that they don't have time to address during the normal work week.

2. Move Fast. Twenty-four hours seems like an impossibly tight time frame to accomplish much of anything useful. However, the time pressure of a hackathon develops focus and teaches people to avoid overthinking solutions.

3. Require Boldness. Hackathons invite employees to take risks and be creative. They require healthy doses of self-confidence and guts to commit to turning a great idea into a working application overnight.

Hackathons become the means by which the new developer or long-time programmer can share a vision for a new product with the management team. Stories of new frontline developers creating features now accessed daily by millions upon millions of users are deeply embedded in a corporate culture that reinforces at every turn the notion that everyone can have a lasting impact on the firm's future.

Providing Structure for Innovation

Building a frontline innovation strategy requires answering three fundamental questions:

1. Innovation Area. Should the front line focus on improving products, business processes or both? Frontline employees tend to be the most knowledgeable about what works in practice and what doesn't. They can identify ways to effectively reduce costs, speed processes or develop alternative work methods.

2. Activity Locus. Where will innovation activities actually occur? Will the front line put ideas into practice or simply pass their ideas on to others who will perform implementation? The real challenge is putting ideas into practice. Some companies prefer heavily decentralized models, where individuals work virtually autonomously.

Summary: JUDGMENT ON THE FRONT LINE

Other organizations prefer tighter constraints and more directive focus for innovation activities.

3. Experimentation Methodology. What is the methodology for screening and testing good ideas? Individual leaders or review committees can be quickly overwhelmed by the volume of ideas generated in companies with large numbers of employees. By contrast, local employees can act quickly and nimbly to implement changes. An explicit framework for innovation and experimentation that everyone knows and that is shared throughout the organization can transform a culture. It enables dialogue and helps employees form seemingly crazy ideas or partial thoughts into serious work.

Used correctly, experimentation, particularly in industries where the cost of experiments is low, provides a radically different engagement model for frontline workers. Rather than see their ideas rejected out of hand or arbitrarily taken away from them by higher-ups for implementation, employees can have a direct hand in crafting real-life solutions. ●

Breaking Down the Hierarchy

How can organizations systematically break down the entrenched hierarchy that obstructs frontline associates from utilizing their judgment? There are no singular solutions, but there are many techniques that organizational leaders can employ, such as shifting organizational language and policies, eliminating unproductive work, soliciting frontline ideas more methodically and promoting collaboration among workers at all hierarchical levels.

The Mayo Clinic provides an interesting case example because societal and organizational assumptions about the roles of doctors and nurses are deeply ingrained. Encouraging nurses to speak up is more than simply a matter of imploring them to do their best for the patient. If the nurse disagrees with a physician or poses an alternative solution to a doctor's prescription, the nurse is perceived as challenging the doctor's knowledge and authority.

The new standard process dubbed Plus One is an "empowerment process, and empowerment tool, and empowerment philosophy endorsed by our leadership up to the highest level in Mayo Clinic," says Dr. Richard Zimmerman, then the hospital medical director for the Mayo Clinic in Arizona. Plus One is a protocol that enables nurses to add one person to the patient-doctor-nurse relationship at any time. A nurse or any other clinical staff member may elevate an issue up one level in the chain of command as he or she deems necessary.

There is no question that the program has been a suc-

cess. The risk-adjusted mortality rate at the Arizona hospital has declined significantly faster than the U.S. average. In part, this is because every Plus One event is reviewed after the fact and treated as a learning opportunity. The knowledge that Plus One is a legitimate option has bolstered the confidence of the nursing team, Mayo's first line of patient protection.

Changing the Organizational Context

There are a few specific actions that nearly all firms are capable of taking:

- **Eliminating Unnecessary Work.** Organizations tend to create unnecessary bureaucracy as a by-product of their operations. In some organizations, employees become trained to not question policy, avoid making recommendations and keep their heads down. Involving frontline personnel has not only shed light on inefficient business practices but simultaneously given those on the front line a sense of increased control over their work environment.

- **Making Time for the Front Line to Think.** Another way to free up frontline capacity is to thoughtfully employ technology to simplify employees' work or seek their input. Many companies use technology strategically to free their front line from manual work or menial aspects of their jobs. Pepsi, for example, used route optimization technology to free up delivery drivers' capacity so they could spend more time creating customer-friendly displays.

- **Getting Intelligence Directly From the Frontline.** There is the logistical challenge of getting input from dispersed locations and hundreds or thousands of frontline employees and then making sense of it in a rational way. Every day, Spanish fast-fashion retailer Zara's staff chat up customers to get feedback on current styles and to understand what is selling. All of the information is loaded into PDAs linked to the stores' point-of-sale system. In less than an hour, every manager globally can send updates that include not only quantitative cash register data but also qualitative customer insights and their own impressions.

- **Promoting Collaboration at All Levels.** In recent years, increasing numbers of organizations are using crowdsourcing and idea markets as a way to tap the knowledge of their employees. These efforts help demonstrate that a company is seeking the best ideas, regardless of where in the hierarchy they may originate.

Ultimately, the goal is not to elevate the frontline workers at the expense of others in the hierarchy but rather to promote respect for them that diminishes the importance of titles, invites insight from employees at all

Summary: JUDGMENT ON THE FRONT LINE

levels and encourages the use of data and the best intelligence when making decisions. ●

Investing in Frontline Capability

Extensive research has shown that the most likely reason an employee will leave the company or, perhaps worse still, remain but be disgruntled, is their relationship with their immediate supervisor. It takes two to tango, so managing this dynamic is as much about the employees an organization hires as about simply building better bosses.

As online retailer Zappos demonstrates day after day and sale after sale, intelligent hiring is an important and controllable variable. Zappos begins by screening for good incoming talent that shares its value system and affable approach to building personal connections with customers. The company also invests heavily in training those employees. In doing so, much like the US Navy SEALs' process, Zappos is able to ensure a good cultural fit and provide training related to judgment skills, business basics and technical capabilities.

The Human Factor

We use the “four Cs” model to summarize the principal dimensions that have been shown to impact an employee's sense of empowerment. Zappos addresses each element as it brings new employees on board:

- **Context.** Employees desire to connect their work to larger goals. Zappos's mission “to live and deliver WOW” customer experiences immediately connects employees to improving customers' lives. The recruiting process reinforces this by screening intensively against the company values, testing whether behaviors associated with these values play a meaningful role in the candidate's prior experience. The \$2,000 offer to quit during the second week of training further reinforces this by ensuring that the candidate is motivated by Zappos's mission and culture, not just the paycheck.

- **Control.** The ability to make autonomous decisions and take action is fundamental to Zappos's mind-set and how the company prioritizes building long-term customer relationships. The parameters for making good judgments are taught throughout training using case studies, observation and real-time coaching.

- **Care.** In the time and energy invested in both recruiting and training, employees see immediate evidence that Zappos is concerned about their well-being. Many weeks of training help the candidate to learn his or her job, unlike the “sink or swim” approach favored in many frontline positions elsewhere.

- **Creativity.** Self-expression is fundamental to Zappos's culture. There is a deep respect for each individual's uniqueness. The recruiting process enables candidates to express their personality and encourages tearing down the façade that most people erect when interviewing.

Sending poorly equipped new hires to be trained by poorly prepared frontline supervisors leads to a staffing turnover cycle familiar to many companies. Many organizations fail to invest in their frontline supervisors. Those who accomplish this task well build organizational commitment, team performance, customer satisfaction and better financial results. ●

A Never-Ending Process

The turmoil that retailer Best Buy faces at the time of this writing was neither sudden nor entirely unforeseen. Since early 2011, analysts and journalists have been in search of the forces behind the company's financial descent. The consensus that emerged is that its business model is severely broken.

The five-step process we have discussed throughout must be a never-ending process in which leaders maintain mechanisms for open dialogue with leaders at all levels. Sustaining the benefits of a frontline investment requires keeping communication lines flowing with information back to top management. Otherwise, the company reverts to its initial steady state.

During our work with the company from 2002 to 2005, Best Buy was able to engage its front line for growth and innovation to deliver stellar results. In 2002, Brad Anderson took over as CEO. Although it seemed that the company could do no wrong, Anderson saw storm clouds on the horizon.

The first step was to work with the top team to agree on the vision and values. Anderson also agreed to launch an “action learning” process that included evaluating strategic options such as acquisitions or geographic expansion. In this six-month process involving 36 company officers, one team focused on capturing more share of the wallet from the high-end consumer segment.

Anderson started one meeting by screening a six-minute video. The mini movie, which had been shot on sidewalks outside Best Buy stores, featured real customers as they exited. One man caustically described the sales force he had encountered inside. Anderson used this brief exercise to create a burning platform for change. He knew that in doing so he would anger some of his top people. And he knew that this would be necessary to focus the company in a new direction.

Summary: JUDGMENT ON THE FRONT LINE

The new “customer-centric” approach acknowledged that Best Buy’s customer offer had dimmed in contrast to Walmart’s potential for offering deep discounts or the brand loyalty demonstrated by Target’s customers. The big opportunity would be to provide a level of localized service and customer experience that would make technology enjoyable again for customers. The way forward for Best Buy would be to create an in-store experience that would more closely connect the company’s thousands of store employees with its millions of customers.

Confronting New Challenges

With things going so well and the stock hitting its high in 2007, how did Best Buy run into trouble five years later? It missed how technology was changing the consumer landscape. Customers are free to take advantage of Best Buy’s service associates, play with products, ask for help and then order from whoever has the best price — often before they even leave Best Buy’s parking lot. Best Buy is equally challenged by the investment required to operate the stores.

Nearly a decade after Brad Anderson assumed the CEO post, the company faces a strikingly similar challenge to reinvent itself as it did in Anderson’s time. Best Buy’s experience demonstrates the difficulty of not only transforming to become a front line–focused organization but also of remaining one. One transformation is rarely enough — continual transformation is a multi-year, even multi-decade effort to unleash the creativity and engagement of thousands of frontline associates. ●

Corporate Citizenship on the Front Line

Whether delivering food with an automobile factory employee or painting a halfway house with an oil industry engineer, each time we work with frontline associates in the community, we are amazed at how profoundly such work impacts them and at the unanticipated benefits it brings in their relationships with their coworkers and employers. We see great opportunity and tremendous benefits when frontline employees are able to represent organizations and community service.

Corporate–citizenship efforts offer an opportunity for frontline employees to partner directly with community members, who are often their customers. Working with someone on a volunteer project can create a more personal relationship than waiting on a restaurant customer, serving someone in a bank or selling them a mobile phone. It offers the chance for employees to understand the thoughts, concerns and lifestyles of some of their

customers in an informal context, while also enabling customers to see frontline employees in an entirely different role.

Indeed, involvement in the community elevates the role of frontline workers and gives added dimension to corporate mission statements that encourage employees to help improve customers’ lives. Citizenship activities also benefit individual employees by providing an opportunity to develop new leadership skills. In some cases, this may enhance their communication abilities as they interact with community members in nontraditional circumstances. In others, they may be lending a skill to leaders and community agencies, showing them how to read a profit-and-loss statement or better manage their staff. Finally, engaging frontline employees offers organizations the ability to exponentially increase both the scale and depth of their citizenship efforts. ●

Conclusion

While we have profiled and extolled the talents of a number of CEOs who have grasped these lessons and put them to good use in their own organizations, our hearts lie with those at the bottom of the organizational pyramid: retail clerks, call-center operators, bank tellers and millions of others who possess both the ability and the desire to give more, to improve their daily work experience and to make life better for the customers they serve. Countless great ideas are lying dormant and untapped in the ranks of most organizations because “nobody ever asked.”

More than simply asking for frontline suggestions, it is time for leaders to create organizational structures and systems that implicitly trust those at the front line — who often earn the least yet do some of the most difficult and frustrating jobs — to exercise good judgment, get closer to customers and day in and day out, deliver great results for their organizations. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Judgment on the Front Line*, you’ll also like:

1. **Turn the Ship Around!** by **L. David Marquet**. The commander of the USS Santa Fe reveals how he instituted give-control empowerment to take his ship from worst to first.
2. **Human Sigma** by **Jim Asplund and John H. Fleming, Ph.D.** The authors offer an innovative, research-based approach to one of the toughest challenges businesses face today: How to drive success by effectively managing the moments when employees interact with customers.
3. **Reviving Work Ethic** by **Eric Chester**. Chester provides specific actions for leaders to give employees a deep commitment to doing excellent work.