

Management & Supervisory Notes

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Lessons Learned at Starbucks

“Suddenly I was very worried.... I had originally thought that a job at Starbucks might be below my abilities. But now I realized it might be beyond them. This job could be a real challenge for me – mentally, emotionally, and physically.”

“... I realized with humiliation that my new job might be a test I could easily fail. I had worn the black pants with a white shirt, no tie. I was feeling lonely and afraid. Then Crystal appeared in a swirl of positive energy.”

The passages above were taken from the book How Starbucks Saved My Life by Michael Gates Gill, but they are fears and insecurities held by many employees the world over. Gill was a former high-flying advertising executive who had “lost it all.” Close to homeless at age 60, he accepted a chance offer to work at Starbucks. Despite being essentially deaf in one ear, math-challenged, and physically weaker than his coworkers (most in their 20s and 30s), Gill not only learned to do his job competently, but to really enjoy and appreciate it in ways he never dreamed of. How, you might ask, can someone who formerly made a salary in 6 figures find true satisfaction and motivation in a job that barely paid enough for him to live in a rented room? The book chronicles his journey, and a number of things stand out:

- Starbucks has a culture of respect and appreciation for their employees whom they refer to as “partners.” Gill said that he came to appreciate a level of respect he never received at the impressive advertising agency where he formerly worked. As of this writing, he still works for Starbucks at approximately \$10.50 per hour. Why would he do so when he has received hefty compensation for the book and the rights to the screenplay? It’s because of the daily affirmation of his abilities and the sense of self-worth that he receives.
- His manager, whose real name is Tiffany Edwards (“Crystal” in the book), diligently upheld the corporate culture – swiftly addressing any behaviors she observed that were out of sync with Starbucks’ organizational values. She also was firm, yet supportive in helping Gill to learn his job and capitalize on his strengths. It is this treatment, no doubt, that engendered such loyalty in Gill that, for some time, he turned down opportunities to work at a Starbucks store much closer to his home – a move that would have greatly reduced the time and costs incurred in his daily commute.
- Through observing his manager, and peers, Gill came to recognize the dignity and worth there is in work itself. He then came to recognize it in an incident that had occurred earlier in his daughter’s life when, as a teenager, she wanted to take a job and he denied it thinking he was doing her a favor.
- Starbucks’ website says, “We are proud to be one of the most progressive employers in the U.S. We believe we’ve earned this designation because we openly value and respect each partner and acknowledge that our success would not be possible without the contributions they make on a daily basis...What’s it like to work at Starbucks? We call each other ‘partners.’ We understand, respect, appreciate and include different people. We hear each partner’s voice. And we learn from each other.”

How Starbucks Saved My Life is an engaging book for all of us about the significance of simple things. It’s also a reminder to supervisors that even those whom we may think should be the most secure in their abilities may not be and thereby require training and coaching, too. And, it’s about how motivating it is to be a part of an organization that values creating the best experience possible for its partners as well as its “guests” (customers).

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