

Hospitality Leaders Take Note: The Bill Walsh Legacy

By David M. Brudney, ISHC, August 2007

Bill Walsh was an extraordinary visionary, communicator and mentor whose legacy far transcends football and sports in general. He was a quintessential business model for anyone who manages and motivates athletes or employees - - especially so today for our hospitality industry.

Pro football fans old enough to remember the San Francisco 49ers' dynasty of the '80s are mourning the loss of the Hall of Fame coach and three-time Super Bowl champion who died recently at the age of 75 after a three-year battle with leukemia.

Walsh's Huge Footprints

As I read and watched the testimonials pour in, I wondered how many hospitality managers today are leaving those huge Bill Walsh-type footprints; a legacy for future generations of hospitality industry leaders?

In order to appreciate somewhat of the impact Walsh had on players, assistant coaches and even employers, here's a sample of quotes (excerpted from "The Bill Walsh Tribute Page" of the San Francisco Chronicle):

Dr. Harry Edwards, sociologist and team advisor: "He believed that people are at their very best as individuals, when they are working with and for each other. He was the most gifted teacher I've been associated with."

Dusty Baker, former major league manager and current ESPN baseball analyst: "Whenever I was having trouble with something, I knew I could call him and run things by him. He was my mentor . . . I counted on (him) a lot."

Dwight Clark, former 49ers wide receiver: "Walsh was a guy who believed in me before I believed in me."

Pete Carroll, USC head football coach: "He was extraordinarily open and giving and willing to help and teach."

Tony Dungy, Indianapolis Colts head coach, another disciple of Walsh: "He never worried about what players couldn't do. He only cared about what they could do."

Steve Young, a Walsh protégé and Hall of Fame quarterback: “He loved coaching quarterbacks and he was the master of the rhetorical question, ‘how could you do that?’”

Jeff Garcia, former 49er and current Tampa Bay Buccaneer quarterback: "He believed in me when not many others did; he was willing to put his reputation on the line in order to give me an opportunity. I always respected and appreciated that and never did I want to fail him."

Jesse Sapolu, former 49ers all-pro offensive lineman, delivering a eulogy at Walsh’s funeral: “He really taught us how to become winners and become champions - - not only as people, but how we raised our family. That’s why you see a lot of women here, too. They appreciate their husbands learning from Bill.”

Eddie DeBartolo, former 49ers owner, the man who first hired Walsh as 49ers head coach: “Not one conversation with Bill that I ever had was wasted.”

Steve Mariucci, former 49ers and Detroit Lions head coach: “He was always good at giving you some advice that you would really consider, and if you didn’t use his information today, it might be next week, or it might be next year.”

Are our managers and supervisors teaching, mentoring and communicating?

I wonder how many of this new generation of hospitality employees 20 or 30 years from now will be paying tributes to their managers and supervisors the way Bill Walsh’s have so eloquently done so for him? How many of our managers and supervisors today possess both the passion and patience for teaching, mentoring and communicating with our maids, front desk clerks, bell staff, F&B, catering, accounting, engineering and Sales?

I believe that never before has our industry needed managers and supervisors with the qualities, characteristics and DNA of great leaders such as Bill Walsh. Why? I believe that’s the type of leadership necessary to attract and retain the very best employees.

A shrinking pool of leadership candidates

All businesses today are facing the challenges of a shrinking pool of leadership candidates. According to a Bank of America study, the number of workers aged 35-45 years will decrease by more than 10 percent by 2011. Roughly two experienced workers currently leave for every one inexperienced worker who enters the workforce.

With skills shortages on the horizon as the huge Baby Boomer generation heads towards retirement, attracting and retaining the newest generation of workers will become critical in the years ahead.

Sociologists and labor analysts tell us that Generation Y - - 73 million born between 1982 and 2000 - - is the fastest growing segment of the workforce (22 percent in 2006). Some of what we’re learning about these Gen Y employees: 1) they’re independent thinkers

and relish responsibility, 2) expect to change jobs frequently, 3) crave attention and expect to feel a sense of accomplishment quickly, 4) want everything now: technology, training, feedback and recognition and 5) the quality of their relationship with their immediate manager is absolutely critical.

But today we manage a workforce representing, for the very first time, four generations (Gen Y and X, Baby Boomers and Seniors) working together, side by side. And it's not just Gen Y that needs instant feedback and validation or a sense of accomplishment quickly. All employees need that today.

The challenges facing the hospitality industry in finding and retaining good employees today are huge. We need managers with Bill Walsh qualities more than ever. We need Bill Walsh legacies of our own.

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David M. Brudney, ISHC, is a veteran sales and marketing professional with four decades of service to the hospitality industry. Brudney advises lodging owners, lenders, asset managers and operators on sales and marketing “best practices” and conducts reviews of sales and marketing operations throughout the U.S. and overseas. The principal of David Brudney & Associates of Carlsbad, CA, a sales and marketing consulting firm specializing in the hospitality industry since 1979, Brudney is a frequent speaker, instructor and mentor. He is a charter member of International Society of Hospitality Consultants. Previously, Brudney held sales and marketing positions with Hyatt, Westin and Marriott.

Contact:

David M. Brudney, ISHC, Principal
David Brudney & Associates
Carlsbad, CA
760-476-0830 Fax 760-476-0860
David@DavidBrudney.com
www.DavidBrudney.com
www.ishc.com