

a firm's foundation

How I built a national firm with culture and purpose

Way back in the mid-'80s, around the dawn of email, I started what became a remarkable company. It wasn't out of my burning desire to blaze new trails or to become a wealthy entrepreneur. No, far from it. I actually had to start my own company because I finally understood I couldn't work for anyone else. I either quit or got fired from every job I had.

And so, with a loan from my good friend Ernie, I started Computer Graphics Distributing (CGD), an independent master distributor of high-end computer graphics hardware and software.

We stocked product and sold to dealers and value added resellers in the Mid-Atlantic region. Along the way, we made the Inc. 500 List at number 144. Clients and vendors liked doing business with us, our employees were engaged, they felt respected and listened to, and even those we fired still came to reunion meet-ups years later.

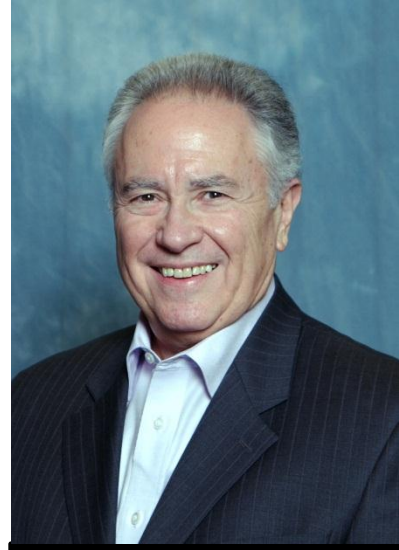
After 11 great years, we merged and rolled up our \$13 million, always profitable company with five other similar regionals and became national. A few months later, we issued an IPO on NASDAQ.

For the past six years, I've been an executive leadership coach to CEOs and executive teams. Some of the principles and ideas I use in my work with clients came from my experience at CGD. I believe our culture and purpose at CGD were key. As Peter Drucker once wrote, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Putting it in writing, communicating face-to-face and walking the talk every day were critical.

Purpose

We came up with a vision that was bigger than ourselves, one that clearly made a contribution to our customers.

I was always intrigued by the words of that door-to-door salesman/philosopher, Zig Ziglar: "You can have everything in life that you want if you will just help



guest columnist

lowell nerenberg

former CEO

Computer Graphics Distributing

enough other people get what they want." Our mission, vision, purpose (whatever you want to call it) was "help our customers become outrageously successful selling our products." It was an ambitious, crisp declaration, which made it compelling and memorable. It revved us up and drove us forward every day.

We did whatever it took to train our resellers in how to sell and install our products. When they needed samples or demos for their prospects, they got them. We even went out to help install their systems when they needed us. They knew they could count on us if they had a question or got into a jam.

Core Values

We had eight. Core values are like shared agreements, standards of behavior and attitude. They are qualities and characteristics we aspire to make into habits. All the employees had a hand in creating them while we sat around the conference table together. We agreed to abide by them and be held accountable, and this is what we came up with:

- Treat everyone with dignity and respect.
- Be easy to do business with.
- Serve each client the way the client wants to be served.

- Go for win-win solutions.
- Communicate promptly and completely.
- Be trustworthy.
- Do the right thing.
- Just do it!

We printed our core values on 4-by-6-inch paper, stuck them into plastic display frames and placed them on each person's desk as a reminder. Everyone in the company was empowered to make decisions on their own, right on the spot – as long as they complied with our core values.

One time, a supplier mistakenly shipped product to us instead of drop shipping to our New Jersey customer who needed the equipment in an emergency over the weekend. So Dave, our warehouse manager, took it upon himself to drive 200-plus miles to northern New Jersey and back, early that Saturday morning.

Culture

Our culture was a reflection of our core values and then some. Culture affects everything and every stakeholder – owners, employees, vendors, customers and the community at large. Of all our constituents, our employees were the first ones we needed to care for. They were the linchpin of our success.

We did our best to treat them well, give them autonomy and trust them to run with it. At our core, we tried to keep it light and edgy. Our motto was, "Trust us. We're in sales®"

At lunch you could usually find us crowded around the big conference room table, having ordered in and just hanging out together. Our almost monthly newsletter, POOPSHEET, was a tongue-in-cheek, technical

marketing piece that most people read for the humor, while we subliminally fed them reasons to sell our stuff. The April (Fool's) issue was always a work of totally insane fiction.

Similarly, our comedic Commercials-On-Hold entertained callers while they waited for their rep to pick up. People even called in from a speakerphone just to be put on hold so their colleagues could hear our nutty pitches – like the one where a guy off the streets talks in hushed tones about an unbelievable leasing program from CGD.

Walk the talk

This one could have been our ninth core value. The Achilles heel of our best intentions is following through on what we stand for and what we say we will do. If we don't actually live it, we'll lose the trust of our stakeholders – and they will disengage. This is a real challenge for human beings and organizations alike.

At CGD, we did our best to deal with our screw-ups by cleaning up after ourselves. One of our senior execs melted down on some inside reps one day when they appeared to be goofing off. Not a great way to influence behavior, and not respectful. Within 10 minutes, she went back in and apologized for the way she handled it.

The Bottom Line

I ask leaders now if they are up to transforming their organization – transforming it into a turned-on, fired up, fully engaged team, aligned on a purpose that makes a real difference in the lives of their customers. I believe this is possible for any organization. Are you up to transforming yours? CEO

Lowell Nerenberg

*Lowell Nerenberg is an executive leadership coach and founder of Coach Lowell.
www.coachlowell.com. Contact us at editorial@smartceo.com.*