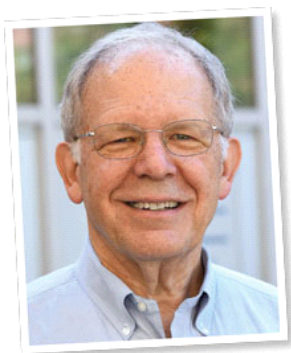


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Next Time You're Late, You're Fired!

Bill McCurry



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In my teens, I worked at McCurry's Camera, our family's chain of photographic supply stores. Home was 20 minutes from the main store, the site of Saturday mornings' "All Hands on Deck" sales meetings. Dad awakened me one of those Saturdays, asking if I'd like to ride to the store with him. This teenager said he'd rather sleep a few more minutes.

You're right. I was late.

The store was 7,500 sq. feet. You rang the buzzer to gain entrance. An employee let me in before hurrying back to the meeting. I slid into a back row seat. Everyone turned to see the boss' kid arriving late and my dad, who was addressing the group, glared at me. After the meeting, he stormed in my direction shouting, "THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE LATE, YOU'RE FIRED!"

I was shocked. How could he say that to his own kid? My teenage anger soared as smirking employees walked by me. Within 10 minutes, everyone at every store location had heard about it. I felt abused, but I was never late for another sales meeting.

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A few years later, I was an on-the-road salesperson for the stores, calling on industrial customers. *The Sacramento Bee* was our largest newspaper, but gave us zero business. They were still an afternoon paper back then, so I asked their lab manager, Erhardt Krause, what I had to do to get their business. He told me, "Your company always comes during the day when we're on deadline. If you seriously want our business, be here on Tuesdays at 6:00 a.m. before our rat race starts."

The following Tuesday I spent two hours at The Bee, getting a fabulous tour of their operations, better understanding their needs and writing what, at the time, was the largest order of my career. At 8:00 a.m., when our order desk opened, I was their first phone call. I was so proud of The Bee order. Erhardt suggested I meet other people in the building. I left about 9:30, after he had made several introductions. Our store opened at 9:30. I walked through the door about 9:45 and went to my desk.

Just before lunch my dad came over to me. "You've had quite the morning" he said. I asked what he'd heard. "Like the rest of the company, I heard you came in at 9:45 this morning." I was steaming, stuttering about working before dawn. He smiled. "I also heard you wrote a huge order from *The Bee*. Congratulations!"

He then got a funny look on his face. "You'll always be the boss' son. Everyone will know the minute you seem to step out of line. You won't get the benefit of the doubt. People won't bother looking for logical reasons for your behavior. Next time you're coming in a minute to an hour late, do everyone a favor. Stop for a cup of coffee. Relax. You can't overcome the wagging tongues, but if you're over an hour late, they'll assume you had an excuse like a doctor's appointment. You won't get that benefit of the doubt if you're 15 minutes 'late' like this morning."

I was frustrated. It wasn't fair. However, the older I got, the smarter my dad appeared. He was correct then and his advice is even stronger today. Unfortunately, in the past decades the entertainment media has declared war on small businesses. Business owners and families are portrayed as villains, short-cut takers, even shysters. It's especially hard for new employees to understand that business-owning families are just like any other family. Some are great. Some aren't. Until the employees learn better, they'll assume you're like the media stereotypes.

Watch for the ways you and your business could be stereotyped. You and your staff must be aware of possible pitfalls. You're constantly in the sights of everyone inside or outside your doors. Make sure they only see you at your best. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389