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Always the Best People

Bill McCurry

Sometimes it takes decades before the Blinding Flash of the Obvious hits you. Growing up in the family business, there was no such thing as racial or gender discrimination in the McCurry's Camera workplace. I worked with female managers and minorities throughout my career.

I attended a Buddhist wedding when I was eight. The bride was one of McCurry's office employees, Helen Ikenoyama. When I took over the company, Helen, by then our vice-president of finance, told me her story for the first time. During World War II, she was a young child who spent years in a Japanese internment camp. I understood there were negative feelings about those from Japan because of the war. I also knew her husband fought in Korea while serving in the U.S. Army. They were great people I'd known almost all my life.

Helen interviewed at McCurry's after she earned her two-year accounting degree from the local community college. Al, our controller, looked like a stereotypical drill sergeant. He was a big, barrel-chested, tough guy. All those years later, Helen told me Al looked at her and said, "We'd hire you, but you'll be getting married and having babies, so you won't be here long enough to train you."

I couldn't believe anyone at McCurry's would say that. Helen told me how she responded. "I just said, 'For what you're paying, you won't find a qualified man to take this job, unless he's using it to job-hop somewhere else. I promise I'll be here at least a year, which is longer than any man would stay in this job.'"

At the time we spoke, Helen had spent over 40 years at the company. I was dumbstruck by Al's reaction and so grateful to 5-ft.-tall Helen for challenging Big Al so McCurry's could benefit from her expertise.

McCurry's was successful for many reasons, a significant one being there was no room for discrimination. We just always hired the most capable people we could find. At my dad's funeral, a former store manager told me that he was arrested after being with us under a year. "Friends" had slipped him drugs. Under the influence, he broke into a hardware store, set-up the tallest ladder he could find and sat on top while the cops searched the building. They eventually looked up, found him and booked him. The employee called my dad from jail at 3:30 a.m. He was scared and didn't know what to do. He worked at one of our stores more than an hour away. Dad immediately drove up, posted bail and took him for coffee to sober up. Then Dad told him to call his assistant manager and say he was sick and couldn't come in. The grateful guy agreed to update my dad at home that night.

The employee had tears in his eyes while telling me his story. Dad told him the incident was forgotten. Dad hadn't/wouldn't tell anyone about it. The

employee could go to work as if nothing happened. My dad also appeared at his trial where the employee received a suspended sentence. He worked for us for five years. Then a customer offered him an amazing job, which Dad encouraged him to take. Until he told me, 25 years later, no one had ever heard his story.

While I consider myself open-minded, I'm not sure I would have trusted a law-breaker on a drug high. For sure, McCurry's had a superb manager for five years because my dad didn't follow customary rules when dealing with an employee's problem.

It's difficult to draw a hard-and-fast conclusion from this story. A great deal depends on a number of issues—the employee's work history, a sense of what the future with him/her will hold and that gut feeling familiar to most good managers. Have you dealt with a similar situation? What would you have done if you were my dad? **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.