



# Business Mentors

## The Dichotomy of a Technologically Advanced Company

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Author : Rosebrook, P. Jr.

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*I recently visited a friend at his new cabin in the Cascade Mountains, 30 miles from civilization and several generations away. It was nearly 30 degrees outside and just over 20 inside. As I sat on the sofa, my experience in water restoration made me wonder what phenomenon kept the water pipes from freezing. My friend told me to go to the kitchen to investigate. Upon entering the kitchen, I was no longer amazed. In the center of the counter, I find a normal kitchen sink, with no faucet and no running water!*

One week later, I was flying across the country working on my laptop and talking on my cellular phone. E-mail, the Internet, palm-sized computers and other technological advances have changed the face of business forever. Sitting in the lounge at the airport, I was reminded of the solitude of my weekend at the cabin. In many ways, only a decade ago, we were in the rustic cabin of the business world. I am proud to be the last of a generation that made it through college preparing my papers on an IBM typewriter. I remember the day our company purchased its first facsimile machine, and a day when our entire operation was run with one 286 computer with a DOS operating system. I am not that removed from a generation that ran businesses without computers.

Technology has had a profound effect on our ability to run a successful organization. Fax machines, networked computers, affordable laptops and electronic communications have allowed many companies to do more with less. Organizations will be faced with certain failure if they do not embrace new technological advances in the business environment of the next millennium.

We are on the brink of a dynamic shift in the business environment as large corporations and small businesses alike utilize the Internet for all facets of their operations, from purchasing to hiring. In a society where human contact and relationships are minimized, business owners need to walk a fine line between being efficient and productive, and failing to recognize the interpersonal aspects of creating a successful organization.

Inadequate communications can lead to many grave consequences in your organization. Without complete information, employees are left to draw their own conclusions to their concerns. In many decentralized companies, there is a serious lack of training for new and existing employees. Orientation and mentoring programs are being neglected or completely disbanded to the detriment of an entire organization. This lack of investment and lack of personal contact with employees leads to resentment. At the same time, the lack of personal attention and a team



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environment are stifling creativity and risk taking. This attitude of indifference can cause fundamental problems in all layers of a company. Technology, used in conjunction with sound leadership and quality personal relationships, can become the foundation of a very successful company.

What can be done to foster the attitude of belonging to a winning team, while at the same time embracing the dynamic changes of the digital age? Hold regular meetings in which essential company issues, including full disclosure of the financial situation, are discussed. Hold regular idea sessions in which employees discuss what the company is doing right and obvious areas of needed improvement. Provide opportunities outside of the office for team members to spend time together. Have a formal orientation program in which all new employees are introduced to their job duties and to the company culture. Have a compelling challenge in which team members are excited about their role in achievement of company goals. Make the workplace fun. Allow for small victories and celebrate achievement. Involve all team members in essential management decisions. Invest in team members through ongoing training. Finally, include input from all members of the organization on the goals, vision for the future and company mission.

In an environment where communications make everyone more readily accessible, it is amazing that customers are having a difficult time getting a hold of us! Voicemail systems, e-mail and pagers frequently place barriers between our customers and us. The Internet and other new advances in technology have changed the way that clients find out about companies and make purchase decisions. These new methods usually involve much less personal contact between the involved parties, making price the most important buying decision. Brand awareness that has developed over the past 10 years can be dissolved in far less time.

Given this changing relationship with our customers, how can we improve? Steve Toburen has taught us a valuable lesson when he reminds us to "put on our customer eyeglasses." We need to look at our companies through the customer's point of view. Do the systems and procedures utilized exist for our convenience or for the benefit of the customer? This question can best be answered by interviewing your customers. Hold focus group meetings in which you ask detailed questions on your service and how you can improve. Ask employees for suggestions in how you can dramatically exceed a customer's expectations. Hold informal discussions with clients on a daily basis. In the 1980s, Tom Peters taught us a management technique called "Managing by Wandering Around." MBWA is a technique that involves getting out from behind your desk and analyzing the company through observation and by asking questions. This is a relationship business. You are not selling a product, but a specialized service. Take steps to build relationships with clients and remember that trust is their main concern.

Business will never again be the same. Electronic communications have forever shifted the reality of the business world. If you do not embrace change, your business will become extinct even if you have been around for 20 years. Remember that the dinosaurs roamed the earth for



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possibly millions of years before they were wiped out by a major event. Technology can be a double-edged sword. Make sure not to neglect the interpersonal relationships that exist in the company. Follow these steps to help create a high performance organization with which employees and customers are excited to be associated. Analyze the log cabin days of your organization to understand the relationship issues that made your company successful, then put on your virtual reality visor and get ready for the future!

**Phil Rosebrook Jr. is a partner in the consulting firm, Business Mentors, which specializes in operational change and management systems for the restoration industry.**