

Personal Perspective

The Redhead's Point of View

By Ed Stern

The act that transforms a regular company into a great company is far simpler than all of the management bookshelves at Border's would suggest. In fact, it comes down to hair color. At some point in their development, the companies that make the leap to greatness become redheads.

What?

Years ago when Nordstrom instituted its now famous "no questions asked" return policy it signaled it had become a redhead. Before Google could be voted the best place to work in the country it first had to become a redheaded company. And Starbucks giving its front-line people the authority to hand out free coffee at their discretion is a testament to the company's redheadedness.

You won't find "redhead" in any marketing or finance textbook. You won't hear it used by the latest Fortune 500 turn-around specialist or 20-something Internet genius. But, make no mistake, it's that redheadedness that makes companies stand out and succeed. There are both large and small redheaded companies out there. The only problem is, there aren't nearly enough of them.

Redhead Defined

What does it mean to be a redhead? Redheaded companies and the redheads who work inside those companies display a mix of guts, honesty, integrity, sincerity, creativity, boldness, humbleness, perseverance, openness, passion and compassion. The one thing

they don't have to have is red hair. It's about attitude. Being a redhead is about standing up and standing out for what you believe and using that belief to inspire others.

Why do I call it redheadedness? Okay, I have red hair, although my carrot-top appearance has faded to almost brown and is now almost gone. Still, as with any redhead, the effects of my hair color will remain with me long after the last strand has departed.

We redheads don't want to be redheads when we're growing up. People make fun of us. We don't fit in. We're given embarrassing nicknames. But there comes a day as we get older when we realize it's okay to have red hair. In fact, it's pretty cool. Yes, we grow up and embrace our redheadedness. From that point on, any redhead has the ability to become an agent of transformation. Sounds kind of heady, I know, but redheads do see the world differently. Maybe it's because we've been so exposed all our lives that we're better able to see through to the truth.

It's Not a Matter of Color

You don't actually have to have red hair to be a redhead, and having red hair doesn't automatically qualify you. What's required is that moment of realization. When a business leader embraces exactly who s/he is and stops trying to be what the rest of the world wants him or her to be is when that person becomes a redhead. With the right leadership, whole companies can become redheads. That's the moment when they're able to focus outward instead of inward. That's when they're able



to bring out the best in others. That's when they realize that caring and succeeding are not mutually exclusive.

The best companies and leaders stand out for being exactly who they are. They don't do it arrogantly. They don't put on acts. They don't demean in order to rise up. They are successful because they're proud, compassionate and not afraid to screw up occasionally.

I am inspired every business day by the redheads that I meet. They are customers, vendors, co-workers, even competitors — people (of every hair color) who are not afraid to speak up, but also are not afraid to listen or to admit when they've made a mistake. They are respectful even when they sit

at the top of the organizational chart. They are businesspeople who value the bottom line but also seem to know that the bottom line is not the final answer.

The other day I witnessed our CFO picking up a broom to straighten out a room before a meeting. His hair appears to be gray, but I know better.

Want to get to greatness? Just declare: "Hi, I'm a redhead." Then, follow your head.

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