

Friday, March 27, 2009

## People First

# Remaining nice in a world of cutthroat greediness has its perks

In tough times, civility and ethics go further than cutthroat greediness

Dallas Business Journal - by [Ashley Forbes Kellogg](#) Contributing writer

Greed and a lack of civility in business are, sadly, nothing new. Credit John Gutfreund, CEO of [Salomon Brothers](#) in 1986, for helping set the current tone for self-centered, oblivious, obnoxious behavior on Wall Street and beyond. The old maxim “my word is my bond” echoed throughout New York City’s Financial District as Gutfreund took Salomon Brothers public in the wake of promising William Salomon he wouldn’t sell the company.

Not long after Salomon shares hit the market, the man known at one time as the “King of Wall Street” left the company in disgrace. From that point forward, outrageous bonuses, slender shareholder returns and never-ending scandals became the rule rather than the exception — and it became harder and harder to find an executive in power with any visible pangs of conscience.

There’s nothing easy about today’s environment. We’re collectively obsessed with what’s going to happen next — and the truth is, no one really knows exactly where we’re headed. Having said that, one thing I do know for sure is that negative thinking is no more realistic than positivism.

## Civility in action

Victor Frankel, a Holocaust survivor and author of the book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” once wrote: “The only thing we can control, regardless of situation or opportunity, is our own behavior.” It’s advice that appears to inform Gary Ahr, head of Dallas’ AHR Financial Group. Ahr couldn’t help but notice recently that people in the building where he offices were primarily using the side doors, not the revolving doors designed to conserve energy. Ahr quickly lobbied the building’s management, posting a sign that reads: “SAVE ENERGY. Please use Revolving Doors.” His actions have resulted in the majority of people using the revolving doors.

As one man, Ahr may not be able to control the markets — but by staying positive, taking initiative and pushing forward, he’s able to make things happen, benefiting others and creating a greater good. He’s clearly decided that he’s happier and his life is richer when he makes good things happen. The last time I was in earshot of Ahr, he was talking to Gary Godsey, CEO of the United Way of Metropolitan Dallas. “Why can’t we start an initiative that connects energy-efficient light-bulb distribution with programs that help with utility

bills?” I heard him ask. “Did you know that one \$1.50 ‘green’ light bulb can save \$45 a year?” I just smiled and thought, “You go, Gary!”

I predict that civility will make a comeback. The Garys of this world soon won’t be alone. Over the next decade, I foresee a sizable shift in the way we measure business progress. As more examples of greedy, unconscionable behavior are exposed, our business leaders are under pressure to not only turn a sizable profit, but to embrace an appropriate level of civility, higher ethical standards and an increased level of corporate morality. It helps, perhaps, that everyone is in pain just now. Pain is a good thing: It helps us understand our limits, and it’s always associated with growth.

### **Practical, positive tips**

- Positive thinking doesn’t mean turning a blind eye. Expect the best, but plan for the worst.
- Don’t feel sorry for yourself. There will always be companies — and people — who are in worse shape than you. Count your blessings and then be grateful.
- Look for good around you and then reward it. Send thank-you notes. Sincerely congratulate others.
- Your mother was right. Be nice. Smile. Say please and thank you to everyone. Hold open doors. Pick up the check from time to time. Treat people well. It not only makes you more effective, it makes you feel good.
- Every once in a while, leave your challenges on your desk and do something wonderful. Give blood. Read a book to neighborhood kids at your local library.
- Organize an officewide community service project — one that takes an investment of time, not money.

Simply put, civility is the ability to put yourself in another person’s shoes, to look at the world through their eyes and, then, to respond from your position to their betterment. Civility — to our employees, vendors, customers and stakeholders — will go a long way toward moving us out of this mess. Call it what you will — recession, depression, correction — it’s as much a psychological phenomenon as it is a financial one.

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