

Once Again, from the Top

By T. Scott Gross

The prospect is a huge (make that gargantuan) international operator. If I told you its name you might suck cold air through your teeth and conjure up an image of me as one very happy consultant hauling money to the bank and sticking feathers in my cap. But you would be wrong.

It was a prospect turned almost a client. The prospect sought me out for my opinion. Spurred on by its CEO who had read one of my earlier books, *Outrageous! Unforgettable Service, Guilt-free Selling*, all the company wanted me to do was pass the test of a simple conference call and then they would meet me at the bank!

That was the plan. The conference call was what did me in. I hate conference calls, always have, even before this opportunity-turned-disaster. They take forever to coordinate and wind up dumping a bunch of folks in a room to go one-on-one with a target on the other end of a phone line. You can't tell whom you're talking to and that's the least of the worry. The worst thing is that inevitably some junior-junior exec at the table who can't resist playing 'stump the consultant' so he can look good in front of the boss.

"So Mr. Gross, how can you help us improve our customer service?" No point in playing softball, so I respond with, "To begin, we're going to make certain you have the right people serving your customers."

Junior replied, "We have the best people in the business already. What else are you going to do?" "We're going to see if those great people of yours are getting the kind of support necessary for great service to

happen."

"You need to know, sir, that all of our team members are empowered to do whatever it takes to make the customer happy," said Junior, no doubt smirking and looking to see if the boss was impressed. "You're wrong." (Why can't I be just a tad more circumspect? Why is it that honesty can't have a softer ring to it? Noooo, I have to just blurt out whatever strikes me as true. To heck with a consulting fee that would pave the driveway and buy a new car to run up and down it.)

Well, I thought the phone line had gone dead. You could have heard the Sprint pin drop, so I said, "Gee, I guess I lost track of to whom I was talking. I hope I didn't offend someone with a million shares in the company." I heard what might have passed for nervous laughter, so I plowed right on saying, "But no matter what, you're still wrong."

Okay, maybe that wasn't laughter I heard, but dang it! I just hate when corporate weenies get so caught up in their baloney that they start to believe it.

"When your team members are faced with an opportunity to do something really out of the box, they aren't thinking about the customer and they aren't thinking about the company. Do you know who they are thinking about?" I paused for a second just in case someone with a brain and a little backbone had slipped into the room by mistake. Seeing that an answer wasn't on the way, I answered myself saying, "Given the chance to step out of the box, that person has only one thought

in mind: Am I going to get killed for this?"

(That's how empowered your people really are. They want to know if they're going to get killed and they aren't about to risk doing something different unless they have witnessed the boss working out of the box.) "That's why after we verify your point that you have the best team members on the planet, we're going to take a look at their managers." Do I feel a chill? (And that's when I lost them!)