

# Leadership Lessons from Rural Oklahoma

By Donna Lawrence

After rushing to my daughter's track meet in Watonga, Oklahoma, I found she would not run for 3 more hours. As I gazed over the luscious green fields of wheat next to the track, I reminisced about my days growing up in rural Oklahoma. Suddenly, I was overcome with thoughts about invaluable leadership lessons I gained. These same principles apply to leadership at all levels in today's fast-paced, technological world.

**1) School Spirit Counts.** Small towns EXUDE pride for their school, and everyone catches the fever. We had Wolverine burgers at the Dairy Boy, sales on maroon fabric (our school color) at the Dry Goods store, and businesses closed for big playoff games. The vast display of school spirit by the community often propelled our teams to victory.

Companies that thrive seem to have a spirit of commitment...similar to school spirit. Do you radiate pride for your business? Your enthusiasm as a leader is contagious. It sets the tone for your entire organization and has a dramatic impact on 'winning the game!'

**2) When the Cows are Out, Call the Owner.** My dad NEVER passed cows that were out without calling their owner. In rural Oklahoma you can depend on neighbors to notify you if they see anything of concern with your land or your livestock.

What has happened in our society that causes so many not to become involved? As a business and civic leader isn't it your responsibility to take action? Effective leaders are not complacent. They are quick to identify opportunities that need attention. Do you set the standard for others in your business and community?

**3) No One is Better than Anyone Else.** I was shocked during my first job after college when I saw professionals change their demeanor toward people in positions below them. In Garber everyone was treated the same, whether the school custodian, banker, plumber, or farmer.

An attitude of equality (or inequality) permeates down from top management. Employees are empowered when they feel they are significant to the company. Job satisfaction rises and the bottom line is impacted. Does your leadership style reflect value and respect for those at all levels of your organization?

**4) You Can Do Anything!** By the time I graduated from high school, I had been an actress, cheerleader, jazz band sax player, show choir entertainer, a harvest chef, a queen, a John Deere parts girl, a speaker, a seamstress, a model, and a leader. I had even been a dancing octopus in a 4-H contest! It never even occurred to me that I might fail at something. This 'Can-Do' attitude was pervasive throughout our town of 1,000.

You have emerged as a leader because of your own determined spirit. Just think what could be accomplished for your company if all employees exhibited an attitude of "I can do anything!" Do you reinforce this positive mind-set throughout your organization?

Sadly, Oklahoma's rural communities are slowly fading away. But let's never forget the lessons they leave us. Because some day, if you are *really* lucky, your company may operate by the attitudes of determination and teamwork found in Oklahoma small towns.

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