

REPORT

FROM THE FUTURE



A New-Economy Fish Story

IT'S 9 AM ON A SATURDAY IN SEATTLE, AND, AS USUAL, A BIG CROWD IS WATCHING THE show at the Pike Place Fish Market. Bear, a boom box of a man clad in fluorescent-orange scrubs, is hurling a 6-pound Copper River sockeye salmon to fellow fishmonger Andy Frigulietti, who snags the fish with one hand, much to the crowd's delight, and delivers it into the arms of a waiting customer. "Sockeye for delivery!" Bear bellows. "Sockeye for delivery!" Frigulietti answers back.

The flying fish are clearly a hit with customers—and with tourists, who flock to the market to experience the show. Lately, though, Pike Place has attracted other visitors as well—from companies such as Alaska Airlines, Marriott, and Sprint. Why the interest from the big-name companies? Because the fishmongers love their jobs. Pike Place has established a reputation for having a creative environment that fosters intense employee loyalty as well as customer satisfaction. Pike Place even inspired "Fish!," a best-selling corporate-training video made by ChartHouse International Learning Corp. two years ago that has since spawned several additional tapes. Now, besieged by requests from managers, Pike Place owner John Yokoyama has spun off a new venture, Pike Place Biz Futures Consulting LLC, so that he can pass along some of his fish wisdom.

Not that the market's formula for success is very complicated: "We want to give employees and customers the best experience

they've ever had," says Yokoyama, 60, who has owned Pike Place for 35 years. Over the years, the self-described "former tyrant" has learned that a company comes to life when it treats its staff as peers rather than as peons. And when a company comes to life, the customers will follow. Yokoyama, who spent his early childhood in a U.S. internment camp for Japanese Americans during World War II, says he grew up to be an "angry young man" who drove people away. But some personal-growth seminars a decade ago helped him address his anger, he says. "And I realized that corporate America needs to change the way it acts toward its employees too."

He has succeeded in bringing that management ethic to Pike Place. "They are experts in humanity," says Kathy Crabtree, director of training for Marriott's Courtyard division, the company's line of casual, affordable hotels. Crabtree learned about the market when she saw one of the "Fish!" videos. Intrigued, she and several other Marriott training officers decided to check out the market. An impromptu dinner with the fishmongers confirmed what Crabtree, 34, suspected to be the secret of the market's success: "In the cor-

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICH FRISHMAN

"WE WANT TO GIVE EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS THE BEST EXPERIENCE THEY'VE EVER HAD," SAYS JOHN YOKOYAMA (RIGHT), WHO HAS OWNED PIKE PLACE FOR 35 YEARS.



porate world, we tend to complicate things, but these guys reminded us that business is really simple. Friendly is friendly, whether it's with other employees or customers."

In his new role as fishmonger-turned-consultant, Yokoyama, along with his corporate-training partner, Jim Bergquist, has spoken to employees at Alaska Airlines and at Incyte Genomics Inc., a medical-devices startup in Palo Alto, about how to unite employees around ambitious goals. He and Bergquist have also met with managers at American Airlines to talk about handling stress at work. This fall, they're presenting "The Art of Enlivening Dead Fish," a series of seminars on bringing the workplace to life.

The subjects of the classes may change, but the message is always the same: It's all about possibility. Rather than staying behind the counter and seeing the limitations of employee behavior, sales, or products, step

outside, say the consultants. "Employees and customers have to be cocreators of their experience," says Bergquist, 53.

They're not making this stuff up. Just last January, which is typically a slow month in the fish business, Yokoyama suggested cutting back on workers' hours in order to cut costs. The fishmongers balked and took him to task—not just for threatening to cut their hours, but for thinking negatively. And then they got to work: They dug up the phone numbers of everyone who had mail-ordered fish last year from Pike Place and started telemarketing. Pike Place's January sales hit a record high this year.

But the market's employee philosophy is not just about dreaming big. Yokoyama believes that if you want to keep a lid on employee defections, you have to give people a good reason to come to work. Work ought to be fun, especially if individual tasks

are less than inspirational. At Pike Place, that translates into fish flinging.

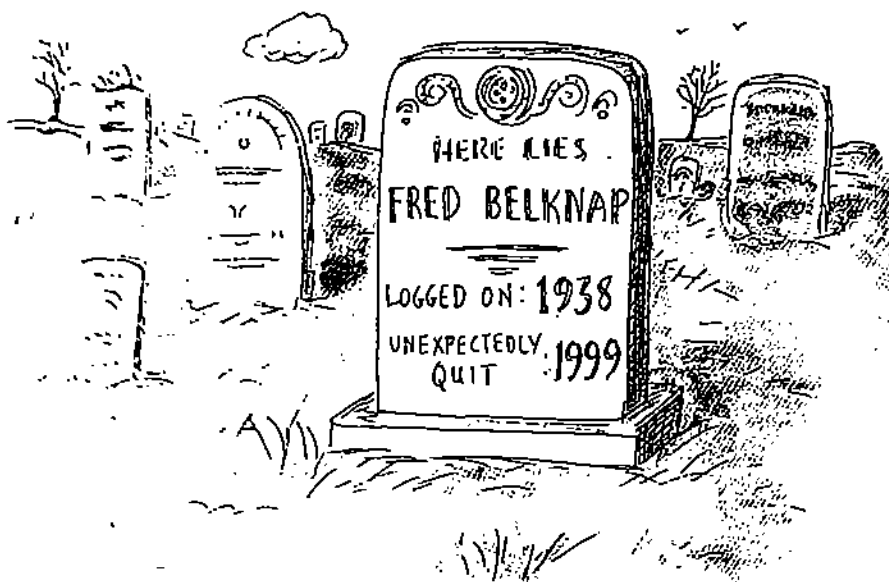
Of course, that probably wouldn't work at Marriott. No matter: "We have a lot of associates whose personal lives are difficult, but they come to work because it's a positive environment," says Crabtree. During Kentucky Derby week, for example, the front-desk staff at the Courtyard Louisville hotel hung paper horses from wires in the break room and "raced" their horses each day. "Silly as it sounds, staff attendance that week was better than usual," Crabtree says.

Inspired by a Yokoyama seminar, employees at a Sprint call center in Lenexa, Kansas turned their office maze of cubicles into an in-line skating obstacle course. It did a lot for call-center morale, according to Sprint employees and managers.

Creating a workplace in which the staff is valued and respected is what it takes to win in the war for talent. Just ask Doug Strauss, who started working at Pike Place when he was 18. After having put in more than 7 years of 12-hour days at the market, today Strauss has a master's degree and four children, and he just started teaching eighth-grade math in September. He still works at the fish market one day a week during the school year and three days a week during the summer. "I'll never leave, because I have a commitment to John," Strauss says. "He's helped me create these opportunities."

And because employees are so invested in Pike Place, Yokoyama says, he doesn't have to worry about business going astray while he's on his consulting adventure. In fact, he visits the market only an hour a day. "Now the employees coach me and tell me how things work," he says. "It's great."

FUNNY BUSINESS ROZ CHAST



CONTACT JOHN YOKOYAMA BY EMAIL (JOYOKO@AOL.COM) OR VISIT THE PIKE PLACE FISH MARKET ON THE WEB (WWW.PIKEPLACEFISH.COM). FOR INFORMATION ON THE "FISH" VIDEOS, VISIT THE WEB (WWW.FISHPHILOSOPHY.COM).