

Ken's Krew: One Of Home Depot's Secrets For Success

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EVERY BUSINESS that succeeds over time will have developed an ongoing effort to help people flourish. It may seem odd to think of it that way, but that's what all the numbers add up to. If you aren't making human beings happier every time they come to your business, you aren't going to survive. If your organization cares about human beings, it will succeed. Customers will know you care—and that's increasingly critical to their eagerness to stick with you.

This sounds like a truism. But how often do you run into a company that obviously doesn't care about what you need or want? And how many companies clearly care enough about their employees so that they, in turn, will care about you as a customer? How many of your workers feel lucky to be employed by you—and then want to share that happiness with the customer?

For years, Home Depot has made its customers and employees its top priority. As a result, it has seen its profits soar. Home Depot goes the extra distance, time and again. It not only has higher-than-average retention rates for workers who clearly love their work and love helping customers, it goes out of its way to hire people others often wouldn't consider employable.

Ken's Krew is a perfect example of this policy of putting people first. It's an independent organization founded by Home Depot's angel investor, Ken Langone, along with Connie Solomon and Karen LaPera. Not only is he still



Workers stock the shelves at a Home Depot store in Passaic, N.J.

(AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey) ASSOCIATED PRESS

its tireless promoter, Ken donates funds from his own pocket and all of his social security income to the organization. It isn't a branch of Home Depot, though Home Depot is its largest client. Ken's Krew trains and finds jobs for young adults with disabilities. Over the past two decades, it has placed more than 600 individuals in Home Depot jobs that many of them have held for more than a dozen years. I spoke recently with Pam Goldman, board member, and Suzy Goldberger, executive director, who described some of this organization's amazing work and why Home Depot loves it.

Goldberger gave us a quick overview:

We deal with a range of cognitive and developmental disabilities: a lot of syndromes you've never heard of, brain injury, Down's and autism. Even in this strong overall employment environment, among this population, only 20 percent find employment. It's very difficult for them to get jobs. Seven or eight years ago, Home Depot realized they could provide a major benefit to society and also add value to their own business. They did a survey to test their idea. Our program was in 59 stores. They surveyed 20,000 customers and 900 employees and the results were off the charts in terms of what it did for customer likelihood to shop in the stores.

For the Home Depot store manager who wants to employ one of these folks with

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disabilities, Ken's Krew makes it a turnkey operation. They do all the work, and the store reaps all the benefits. This organization qualifies candidates scrupulously, weeding out anyone who will be clearly unable to function in the stores. They don't want to set anyone up for disappointment. They train their young adults for both job skills and social skills. When Ken's Krew brings a new employee to work the first day, he or she will be completely ready to hit the ground running, and the organization continues to work with him or her until the employee is ready to be completely independent on the job.

A Ken's Krew recruit will not be singled out as special. If anything the organization and Home Depot work with them as they would any other employee and in some cases it isn't actually apparent to any of the rest of the staff that the new worker has come to the organization through any route other than the usual employment process. They aren't given special badges nor are they singled out in any other way. Some autistic candidates have character traits that aren't really that pronounced or noticeable. If and when the rest of the workforce realizes that the new employee has a disability, it's hardly considered unusual. That's how integrated this mainstreaming process has become at Home Depot.

"Once they are on the job," Goldberger said, "we give them one-on-one training for six to eight weeks but they will get as much training as they need beyond that as well. We teach specific job tasks. We have former special educators, social workers, and behavioral therapists." If the worker becomes genuinely unemployable for whatever reason, Ken's Krew handles the termination, taking the emotional burden off the shoulders of the store management.

Ken's Krew absorbs all the costs of this initial training. And then it goes on to support and counsel its job placements for life. It checks in with them on a rigorous schedule, every six to eight weeks. What's most inspiring about this program are the instances where it turns a personality trait that would be considered job-threatening in many circumstances into a competitive advantage for the worker.

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Goldberger offered an example:

We had a store in Long Island with one of our workers who couldn't get comfortable anywhere. He was a chatterbox and wandered around, couldn't stop talking. At one point we had him at the front of the store because we were running out of ideas and this young man was so talkative but personable. Eventually we found the perfect fit. He ended up selling more Home Depot credit card sign-ups than anyone in the store. The store ended up loving him. These can be the best employees in the world, and they lift up the morale of all the employees: they are just thrilled and proud to go into work in the morning.

Out of 680 people who have come through the program, 430 of them are working right now in Home Depot retail stores throughout nine states. Average job tenure is four years, but that number is deceptively low because the program has doubled in size over the past few years and many of these employees were only recently placed. More than two dozen have been holding their jobs for longer than 15 years, 80 for more than ten years, and 183 more than five years.

"You don't see this job tenure anywhere in retail," Goldberger said. "We received an email recently where the store manager said, 'We are absolutely ecstatic about this awesome opportunity'."

This sort of program works in so many invisible ways to lift the morale and ethos of an entire store, it stands as proof, minute by minute—as a Ken's Krew worker goes about his or her day—that Home Depot puts human beings as its first priority. Anyone who walks in, either at the beginning of a day's work, or to buy something from the shelves, will feel that spirit and want to come back again, without ever having to look at a sales receipt to check the cost of the visit. When you find a place where people care about one another, you don't abandon that store. You feel you too want to belong there. It's really that simple. Once again, it all comes down to human beings. They are the value creators in the 21st century.

**Ken's
KREW**