

During Covid-19, Home Depot Made Our Better Angels Shine

Peter Georgescu CONTRIBUTOR

2020 has proven to be the most challenging, tumultuous year in modern American history. It has also been a year of learning. We have collectively learned that the vast majority of Americans – most of us – have been vulnerable and are hurting. We in business learned that business and society can no longer exist in segregated, separate spheres. While business has been in part, culpable for our society problems, business can and must lead the path forward to sustainable solutions. I, for one, am optimistic that business will chose the inclusive version of stakeholder capitalism because a good many businesses are already beginning to practice it and are fulfilling the needs of multiple stakeholders.

One such company is Home Depot where the loyal employees boast of having “orange running through their veins.” They have a lesson to teach the rest of us. The blended family of Home Depot workers who wear their orange aprons with love and pride have been doing something utterly remarkable during the pandemic—remarkable both as a business and more broadly as a way of being human.

I want to tell you about one particular orange-blooded young adult you’ll see on the lot at Home Depot: Noah Roberts. His little daily acts of heroism over the past year have enabled him to grow beyond his disabilities into an exemplary human being. As people all over the country were getting deathly ill from Covid-19, he kept putting himself at risk and coming to work every day (masked of course) for as many hours as he could. He is a part of Ken’s Krew, a marvelous program allied with Home Depot, whose mission is to mainstream young adults with disabilities into the work force.

Noah is one of this enormously successful retailer’s people who help you find your



Noah Roberts pushing shopping carts at Home Depot in Kennesaw, GA during the pandemic.

TAMMY ROBERTS

(Noah’s) little daily acts of heroism over the past year have enabled him to grow beyond his disabilities into an exemplary human being.

way through a home improvement project. He has Asperger’s Syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum that makes it nearly impossible for him to read body language, facial expressions, emotional tone, and irony. In other words, until Home Depot came along, he grew up socially isolated, guarded, excluded from the circles frequented by most of his high school acquaintances. A year into his employment at “The Depot”, Noah has become exceptional among a workforce that is, on the whole,

almost equally distinguished.

His mother Tammy has been working at Home Depot for 26 years. She is a lifer there, a master of her craft in making customers happy. And she's so grateful that her son is a "Homer." (She isn't alone. Parents of Ken's Krew members have difficulty holding back tears of gratitude when they talk about their kids.)

"My son has benefited from the program more than I can tell you. The store has been fabulous in boosting his confidence and skill and morale. He has lost a lot of weight and gained muscle. It's the first real job he's had coming out of high school. May he follow in his mother's footsteps and have 26 years with us," she said when we spoke with her by phone.

THE PANDEMIC, believe it or not, simply turbo-charged this progress for her son. Home Depot went out of its way to take care of its workers and the workers responded fearlessly and selflessly. Home Depot gave everyone the option of staying home, with pay, for a limited time and then a voluntary furlough, if the employee felt safer being isolated during the height of the pandemic. Almost no one chose to stay home.

Tammy told us: "With Noah, I didn't think he would be able to do as much as he has in this program. The recognition he has received for being such a helpful, strong associate has had a remarkable effect. To be told you are such an asset, and to be thanked for all you do, has been transformative for him. He has continued to be given more and more responsibilities. Now he is interacting with a lot of the pros and the customers and that's amazing for his character. He isn't nearly as shy as he used to be. He is treated as a normal human being, as just another associate. They respect him as much as they do any other associate. That's the biggest thing: he doesn't feel quote-unquote special."

All of its stores reduced hours, closing early, so that people could thoroughly disinfect everything in the store, and yet work hours remained the same or increased. Workers have even been given the chance to put in

extra hours during the lock down. Jennifer McAleese, Ken's Krew executive director, said, "The chance to work overtime during the pandemic has led some Ken's Krew members into being hired as full-time employees. We had Ken's Krew members who have been with us for ten or fifteen years. "At that point, it's not a job, it's a career," Terri Neipert, Director of Vocational Training, told us. I would put most of the Ken's Krew associates head and shoulders above most workers in terms of work ethic and dependability. They are amazing young adults. They live to be praised for doing a good job."

TAKE A MOMENT to consider all of this. Here is a huge Fortune 500 retailer that is not only doing everything it can to protect its shoppers and employees during the pandemic. It is doubling-down on a program that prioritizes the emotional growth of its disabled workers: and it tells them that if they want to stay home with pay they can. Yet, because Home Depot has embraced them with such love and respect over the years, they race back to work—because they love it so much.

In all fairness, Home Depot's business only gotten stronger during the pandemic, partly because it was on the list of essential services. But also because shoppers knew this company had their backs, before and during the pandemic. Shoppers love this store, because it treats them and its own employees as the most valuable players in the game of capitalist success.

As a result, in October, the retailer won a coveted award in conjunction with the National Disabilities Awareness Month as recognition for the exception work it has done in mainstreaming those with disabilities. Exceptional is putting it mildly.

McAleese said, "We lost three or four Krew members' parents who passed away because of Covid. I know of one young man who lost his mom in Florida and he was offered two weeks off but he insisted on going back to work. It helped him through the grief."

In short, Home Depot has become for many of its workers a second family, in addition to the one at home.

Diane Macaluso, a consultant for Ken's Krew, told us: "We have a Krew member who worked in New York. He lost a parent and a brother in the same year and we took him on as a worker because he was living in an apartment with several of his brothers. During the pandemic, he was close to being evicted. We helped him apply to the Home Depot Homer Fund, which is financial assistance for those in need, and even though he didn't fill all the requirements, Home Depot granted him what he needed." (Karen LaPera, co-founder of Ken's Krew, said it's named after Ken Langone, who was the core angel investor for Home Depot and played a similar role for this organization when he found it its first home in a Philadelphia Home Depot.)

Is there anything in all of this that can't be replicated in any corporation anywhere? I think not. Treat your employees with kindness, fairness and respect, give them what they need to live their lives, and they will repay you a hundred-fold. To make an income, and to make a profit, over the long-haul, you have to be a good person and a good company. Home Depot passes all the tests, and their business has skyrocketed as a result.

Jennifer McAleese told us that any company can contact her if they would like to partner with Ken's Krew. The program would love to join with additional national employers who have a strong corporate culture similar to Home Depot's. Ken's Krew helps employers save money by assuming all training and support costs. Its workers are trained for diverse positions including customer service and they have strong retention with an average employment tenure of 4.2 years versus 6 months in the retail industry.

Every corporation in America should be looking to Home Depot as a case study in best practices in the way it treats employees with respect, generosity and kindness. What Home Depot is doing should be duplicated everywhere. It's also an example of a corporation meeting important needs of other stakeholders, in this case the community in which it does business. This is the essence of what the emerging power of stakeholder capitalism is all about. ●