

## FOCUSED FEATURES

### IN THE TRUE SPIRIT LEADERSHIP – THE CLAIR STORY

A number of years ago, I hired a young design school graduate to support an expansion project my design and furnishings firm was about to launch.

Clair was one of many candidates my leadership team and I interviewed for the position. The difference with Clair was my gut instinct during our initial phone conversation. I felt Clair's genuine enthusiasm, level of maturity, and ability to quickly understand the bigger picture would offset any industry, company, and technical skills we would need to teach. Our goal was to hire "inexperience" so we could mold and shape the person to best fit our company's needs, and Clair had scored key points during this phase of the hiring process.

After a long and grueling drive from central Ohio, through thunderstorms and other "on the road" maladies, Clair arrived at the office ready to be interviewed and ready to be hired. After a bit of negotiating, Clair accepted our career proposal and we were off and running.

In the past, we provided a brief orientation program for new employees that included a cursory look at various aspects of the business, along with the appropriate product and technical skills training. Typically, our project load and the need for everyone to be productive every minute of the day, prevented us from taking a new staff member off line long enough to really give them a full understand of how the company worked and where they fit into the picture.

With Clair, we decided to try a different approach to orientation and training. Our project load was more intense than ever and we were in the process of integrating a newly purchased franchise program. Clair was coming on board to support that franchise, so having a clear understanding of how all the pieces fit together would prove to be paramount.



During the first month of employment, Clair participated in a full spectrum orientation process that included every aspect of the company. Clair spent a minimum of one full day working in each department, getting to know the people and the processes. When the "business" side of the orientation was completed, we sent Clair out to project sites to get a better picture of how the work we did translated into end results. Clair's eagerness to learn made it easier for everyone to do their part of the orientation, and complete the ramping up process.

#### Timely Challenge

A few months after Clair came on board, I received a call from a Client regarding a new project. Their company had recently created a new brand, and it was time for them to set up a separate physical location in which the brand could operate. The Client was in a bit of a panic because of the scope, magnitude, and time frame of the project. It was the day after Thanksgiving and they needed their new space designed, renovated, fit-out, furnished, and fully occupied by January 1<sup>st</sup>. As if that wasn't challenging enough, the Client was still negotiating the lease, we were in the midst of a 4 - day



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holiday weekend and facing hunting season, two major holidays, and end-of-year manufacturer shut-downs. And, did I mention, none of our seasoned designers were available to work on this project.

### Leap of Faith

My company was known for executing these types of complex, hyper-tracked projects, but now I was in a bit of a panic. I needed to step back and take a running leap of faith - Clair and I would do this project together. It would be the best "on the job training" we could ever offer someone with little more than intern experience.

From the initial interview with the client, through the design and specification phases, ordering materials, coordinating sub-contractors, and scheduling and managing the work, I was hearing more of Clair's voice than my own. Little-by-little, Clair was demonstrating leadership on a very large project and I was letting it happen.

We completed the project on December 29<sup>th</sup>, and the client moved in on schedule, but this is hardly the end of the story.

### Thorough Planning

After the client moved in, it was time to walk through their new space and make note of all items that needed to be adjusted or repaired (punch list), and schedule the work for completion.

I asked Clair to meet with the Client, do a brief walk through, and put an initial punch list together. I had just been to the jobsite a couple days prior and knew what items should be included on the punch list.

A few hours after Clair returned to the office from the walk-through, we met to review the outcome. After going through the items noted on the punch list, Clair further explained the thought process of how the punch list could be approached - who should be responsible for what items, how much time it should take to complete the items, and how to organize the work around the client's schedule.

### Taking Initiative

Listening to the presentation of this information, I was very pleased with the details. The punch list covered everything I had observed (and more), and I would have approached the process in the same exact way. After expressing my endorsement to proceed, present the information to the Client, and get the work scheduled, Clair said "Good, because that's exactly what I did." The interesting part about this response was my lack of surprise. Clair had taken initiative throughout the project and this action was proof of understanding and commitment. In hindsight, the punch list was Clair's "final exam" and the grade was an A+.





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### Leadership Can Be Taught



I knew we had a “rising star” on our team, but didn’t realize until years later that leadership is not age, education or experience related. It is a **mindset**. A mindset that can be taught if the desire to learn the skills is part of the individual’s basic foundation or personal culture.

Clair clearly brought a personal culture of excellence and a willingness to learn to the company. In turn, we provided a comprehensive learning experience through the orientation, training and mentoring, along with an environment of trust.

Realizing how much I had personally grown from the experience of working with Clair, I expressed my appreciation in a note stating “Thank you for showing me that mediocrity is no longer acceptable.” And, things were never the same for me.