Do You Want Fries With That?

Dave was born in Atlantic City in 1932, a tough time in American business history. He never knew or met his birth parents. He was adopted at six weeks old, his adoptive mother dying when he was five. His adoptive father moved often in search of work. He got his first job at age 12 in a restaurant in Knoxville. He was fired after a misunderstanding with the boss. Moving again he got his next job in another restaurant in Ft. Wayne. He met Lorraine, a waitress, who would become his wife. When his father prepared to move again, he decided not to go and dropped out of high school to work full time. (He did get his GED 45 years later in Ft. Lauderdale and was selected "most likely to succeed" by the graduating class of 1993! He was 61 years young.)

He volunteered for the Army during the Korean War, went to Cook and Bakers School, and ended up feeding 2,000 soldiers daily in Germany. He left the Army in 1953 as a staff sergeant.

He met Colonel Sanders of Kentucky Fried Chicken fame. After turning around four failing KFC franchises, the restaurants were sold back to KFC. His percentage of the deal made him a millionaire at 35.

But he had an idea since the age of twelve about opening his own hamburger restaurant. At the age of thirty-seven he fulfilled the dream by opening a hamburger restaurant in Columbus, Ohio. Dave Thomas named the restaurant after his daughter, Melinda Lou, whose nickname was Wendy.

You pretty much know the rest of the story.

He grew the chain to 6,000 Wendy's. He was a pioneer in his industry and received every industry award available. Who has not enjoyed his innovations: square hamburger made to order, salad bar, pick-up windows, and unique décor. And who could forget the 800+ folksy commercials he appeared in, a Guinness world record. Along the way he was presented the Horatio Alger award by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. The first President Bush asked Dave to lead the White House Initiative on Adoption. He founded the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and through his influence two bills were passed by Congress to speed up adoption procedures and give incentives to individuals and states. He partnered with the US Postal Service to create an Adoption postage stamp. He gave millions of dollars to dozens of hospitals and schools that bear his name. He died January 8, 2002.

Dave's Five Values
1. Quality Is Our Recipe
2. Do The Right Thing
3. Treat People With Respect
4. Profit Is Not A Dirty Word
5. Giving Back

Fast forward to today
Wendy's is for sale. The franchisees are unhappy, sales are flat and profits are down. Lots of reasons are cited, but the consensus is that Wendy's got away from the core values that made it successful.

And to top it off, in March of this year, the original Wendy's in downtown Columbus, Ohio was closed because of sagging sales.

The Leadership Challenge
As a leader, when you go into a new situation, whether it is a promotion to supervisor, manager, CEO, or as the proud new owner of an existing business, take your time to look around and see what is right. Don't just look for what's wrong. The old adage of "don't fix it if it ain't broke" has somehow been replaced with, "I'm in charge now so let's see how many changes I can make in the shortest amount of time." Maybe its time to think evolution, not revolution. Wendy's was successful for a reason. If your department or organization is successful, ask yourself, "What values and visions made it that way?"

When the new boss asks, "What changes have you made?" (and the new boss will ask), don't be afraid to say, "The person before me did a great job, I am looking to make sure we continue on the successful path before instituting any changes that may upset the apple cart."

It will take a lot of courage to say that, but that's part of leadership.

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.