

Kwik Trip: Compassion counts most of all

By Ed Byrne
 The Brillion News

DE PERE – Usually, when St. Norbert College holds one of its signature “CEO Breakfasts,” it is loaded with stuff that corporate executives can use in running their businesses.

But on January 14, the speaker offered far more than solutions involving “lean manufacturing” or “logistics” or other typical corporate penthouse talk.

The speaker was John McHugh, former principal of Aquinas Catholic High School in La Crosse. A former seminarian who studied theology at the Vatican’s Gregorian University in Rome, McHugh is now Director of Corporate Communications, Leadership Development and Training for Kwik Trip.



John McHugh

If you think McHugh’s schooling in theology has nothing to do with Kwik Trip, think again.

McHugh’s speech at St. Norbert College last week was a soul-searching journey into morality and business that had many of the corporate executives in the audience wiping away tears.

McHugh gave a verbal picture of Kwik Trip as a business where compassion reigns supreme and turnover is minimal.

He also told stories that brought home the corporate vision.

One was of an older man asking a Kwik Trip employee for help in pumping gas, checking the oil in his car’s engine, and checking tire air pressure. The employee showed him how, and then the man explained why he asked all of the questions:

“I came here today to see if what they say about Kwik Trip is true. I heard that you take care of people,”

the man said. “I found out that I have cancer, and in three months I won’t be here ... My wife has never had to pump gas, check the oil in her engine, never had to check the air in her tires. I wanted to make sure there’s some place where she can come after I’m gone that they’ll take care of her.”

As McHugh tells it, doing right as a business is all about taking care of people.

“Our mission at Kwik Trip is not to sell gasoline or hot dogs,” he said. “Our mission is to treat others as you’d like to be treated ... It’s the Golden Rule applied to business.”

McHugh said that’s the common thread that runs through Kwik Trip’s 26,000 employees in 700 locations, by “making sure that what they do really matters.”

Compassion is local for Kwik Trip

BRILLION – When firefighters from Brillion, Potter and Reedsville fought Brillion’s first structure fire of the winter early Sunday morning, they returned to the fire house to clean up and warm up.

That’s when folks from the Brillion Kwik Trip showed up – with hot coffee, cocoa and donuts.

Kwik Trip also had a supply of goodies for the Reedsville firefighters to take back to their fire station. The RFD assisted Brillion at the fire scene by staffing a rapid intervention team.

Brillion Fire Chief Joe Diener said Kwik Trip regularly does acts of kindness and compassion in the community, but shuns publicity about them.

That said, quality control is huge at Kwik Trip. McHugh said 80 percent of the products sold at Kwik Trip come from its base in La Crosse. It has its own bakery, dairy and commissary. All of the milk comes from dairy farms near La Crosse. Kwik Trip even makes its own milk jugs for retail sales.

It is one of the most vertically integrated retail companies in the world.

McHugh said milk goes from cow to store in about 12 hours.

He said the company limits bad customer experiences with its products by controlling the process that ends up in the store.

“We have 8.5 million guests a week in our stores,” McHugh said. “We have no clue what’s going on in their personal lives ... We believe that in this day, in our world, the thing that we need more of is compassion.”

He said compassionate interaction between an employee and a customer is critical.

Because of that, hiring is the critical point in the Kwik Trip business model.

“We really don’t have a great training program at Kwik Trip,” McHugh said. “It’s not about the training – it’s about the hiring – because if you’re bad to the bone, there’s not a darn thing I can do in a training program that’s going to fix that ... So we interview for a fit with our compassionate culture.”

The interview with an applicant includes three questions: When was the last time you did any act of kindness for someone? How have you made a difference in someone’s life this month? How have you treated others as you like to be treated?

“If you can’t answer those first three questions [satisfactorily], we don’t go any further in the interview process,” he said.

The idea is to find good people,

hire them, nurture them and retain them.

“The Golden Rule, ‘other’ centered,” McHugh said.

Kwik Trip had 4,000 openings in 2019 and 136,000 applications for them. McHugh said the company can be – and is – more selective than Harvard University or Stanford University.

“It’s not about the training. It’s about the hiring,” McHugh said.

The company has an annual turnover rate of 20 percent. In the convenience store business as a whole, annual turnover is over 125 percent.

Company training is anecdotal – telling stories to make points. The stories are emotional and “bring Kleenex” is McHugh’s advice.

“That’s how you form great culture and compassion. You tell stories and when you tell stories, you celebrate them,” he said. “When you have purposes and compassion, good things happen – not only in our stores but in our communities.”

The company keeps workers by including them in the profits. At the end of 2019, every employee got a bonus equal to 10 percent of his/her pay for the year.

Despite that, McHugh said the number one reason why people stay at Kwik Trip is this: “My supervisor or someone else at work cares about me as a person,” McHugh said. “That’s why we spend so much time internally about compassion.”

He said a business must have a purpose beyond profit in order to be successful, and said that celebration is a part of that philosophy.

“Goodness celebrated engenders more goodness,” McHugh said. “If you want to engage your employees, make sure they know that what they do matters, that it has a sense of purpose, beyond just making a buck.”

Customer loyalty, he said, comes from service and compassion, not from price nor from location.

McHugh said the corporate internal culture revolution at Kwik Trip began in 2004.

That year, the company received 21 letters from customers complimenting it. In 2019, the company received 2,355 unsolicited customer letters praising its service.

McHugh read one of his favorites, from a poor mother. Her son had gone to Kwik Trip through the snow and was at the store cleaning the snow out of his shoes.

“He didn’t have any socks on because we just don’t have any money right now for new ones,” the mother wrote.

A Kwik Trip employee was outside shoveling the sidewalk when he saw that the boy had no socks. The employee took off his socks and gave

them to the boy. The mother wrote to Kwik Trip to say thanks.

McHugh called the store manager after he read the letter and she confirmed what had happened.

The employee, a boy named Matt, came into the manager’s office after he gave his socks to the younger boy.

“After Matt did this, he came into my office and cried because he felt so badly for that kid,” the manager told McHugh.

The employee was 18 years old, still in high school working at Kwik Trip part-time.

McHugh said Kwik Trip can not take credit for what Matt did that day.

“Matt knew that long before he ever came to Kwik Trip,” McHugh said. “It’s obvious that he was raised in a family where the Golden Rule is valued.”

He said the trick is finding those people in the pile of applications and making sure the workplace at Kwik Trip encourages those compassionate attitudes.

McHugh said the customer is not always right, but deserves to be treated with compassion anyway.

He said it’s more important to win a customer’s loyalty than to win an argument with a customer over anything.

McHugh described a ladder of excellence in dealing with customers that goes up from dissatisfied to satisfied to loyal.