
ACC DOCKET

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Out With the Trash

Skills and Professional Development



It's 1:30 pm and you walk into the office conference room for a lunch that marks the conclusion of a two-day training session. As you scan the room, you notice that there are several people finishing up their lunches, but you also notice on the back counter a mess of spilled food and half empty containers that no one bothered to clean up. That is not such an odd sight; people make messes all the time. But then you notice something that is odd and really catches your attention.

An older, white gentleman, good looking and very distinguished, dressed in a crisp white shirt and dark suit starts boxing up the leftover food and wiping down the counter. He combines food in containers and stacks them in the corner, and then he throws away the empties. Next, he takes the full trash bag out of the garbage can and out of the building.

What just happened? Who is this man? He isn't the building's custodian or the employee responsible for cleaning up after meetings. This is the CEO of the company that is conducting the training. Then you recall seeing this same man do something similar at another training event, so you decide to comment on his behavior. As you are talking, he relays an experience he had when he was in the restaurant business.

One day he was walking up to the loading dock of one of the restaurants he owned. If you have ever been near a restaurant loading dock, you know it is not a pleasant place to be — visually or aromatically. Instead of going inside, he picked up a water hose and starting washing the area down. Not long afterward, one of his employees walked up and asked him what he was doing. His response was a simple, "something that needed doing." That was the last time he arrived and saw a dirty dock. What just happened?

Everyone knows there are some things that people high on the corporate ladder just shouldn't be

doing. Not because they are too good, though some may think or believe they are, but simply because it is not cost effective for them to spend their time that way. The higher you go in an organization, the more likely it is that the person with a particular job has duties and responsibilities that few, if anyone else has. That means those are the things that person should be spending their time on. However, just because you shouldn't be doing something does not mean you cannot do them. And that was the example our CEO set for his employees.

Earlier in his career, this CEO had made the decision that he would not ask anyone to do anything he was not himself willing to do. While some in management positions might think that would lead to anarchy — if I don't ask or tell people to do something then it won't get done — this CEO found exactly the opposite to be the case. Because he was not only willing to do the dirty jobs, but did them in front of others, he displayed for them an ethic of “do as I do.” His reward was employees willing to do those jobs as well. After all, how would you ever explain to your supervisor that the company owner was doing something that you were paid to do?

I work around people who are in the habit of not cleaning up after themselves. These are the same people who think they are too good to walk into a room that should have been set up for their meeting, find it in disarray, and then take it upon themselves to set up the room. Instead, they complain about what wasn't done and possibly even yell so that everyone within earshot — even those who weren't — heard later about how unhappy they were with the performance of the person who didn't do what they were supposed to do. However, you can do both. You can handle the situation at hand and then deal with the failure to act at a later and more appropriate time.

At the end of the day, nothing you do as a manager, supervisor, boss or leader goes unnoticed. The attitudes those who follow you display are a reflection of your attitude. You can order them around and you have every right to do so or you can set the example and watch them tackle jobs with an it-needed-doing attitude.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.