

As published in the July 19, 2012 online edition of

# Convenience Store News

---

## COVER STORY BONUS: Key to Leadership Is Blowing in the Wind



When people reach leadership positions in their careers, it's easy for them to think that in this new role, they should work to emulate a tree, grounded by its roots and reaching high in the sky, looking over everything and everyone, and standing impervious to even the strongest winds of distraction, conflict and change.

The analogy isn't bad, but with one exception. Rather than trying to always stand tall no matter how strong the wind, it's important for trees -- and for leaders -- to bend in this force, to show flexibility and then, as the situation calms, to straighten back up in good example and readiness for the next storm that passes through.

For leaders in the convenience store industry -- whether they are team leaders or store managers, owners of a single store or CEOs of a regional chain -- this analogy is incredibly apt. Winds, in the form of dissatisfied customers, unhappy employees, evolving market conditions or constraining government regulations, threaten to blow at any moment. As a leader in the convenience store industry, one has to find the inner resources to face every situation with equanimity and thoughtfulness.

Convenience store owners and managers are leaders on the front line. Convenience stores are high-touch businesses, where customers and employees alike come from incredibly varied backgrounds and expect to have immediate access to a manager when they have an issue or challenge. Such issues are usually resolved in real-time; these leaders do not have the advantage (like those at a business that is perhaps separated from its customers by a phone line or the Internet) of putting the customer "on hold" or delaying a response in order to take time to collect one's self.

Yet, customer issues might only represent a gust of wind here or there. The c-store environment can be rife with a myriad of other challenges, including long hours, a fast pace and the constant juggle of staffing, inventory and profitability. Despite these challenges, the credibility of every leader -- from the part-time supervisor to the store manager -- as well as the success of the store depends on how they behave under scrutiny and pressure.

Evolving market conditions and new government regulations constantly challenge c-store leaders to stay flexible. Hank Armour, president and CEO of NACS, the Association for Convenience and Fuel Retailing, recently highlighted three areas he believes will define the industry's future: fuels, foodservice and grassroots advocacy. Armour pointed out that while c-store retailers are the leading fuel providers today -- selling an estimated 80 percent of gasoline purchased in the United States -- cars are changing and, as such, the fuel used to power those cars is also changing. C-stores need to be active in embracing these new technologies to remain a market leader in providing vehicle energy.

In addition, the incorporation of more foodservice offerings within convenience stores has added new gusts to the convenience store climate. Different training for employees is required to effectively offer expanded prepared food selections, and new legal requirements to meet health and safety standards must also be considered now.

As for grassroots advocacy, a recent c-store industry victory was realized in the efforts of many industry professionals to bring attention to outrageous credit card swipe fees, and the effects these fees were having on the industry.

Leaders in the c-store industry will need to develop resilience in order to effectively weather these new and not-so-new challenges. To develop resilience, leaders must concentrate on developing creative leadership competencies that allow them to be strong yet agile, decisive but flexible, and responsive but not reactive.

These skills, or creative competencies, are equally people-oriented and task-oriented and collectively allow a leader to be more effective. Effective c-store leaders will focus on relating well with others; establishing a respectful and caring connection with employees, customers and suppliers; and encouraging collaboration and opportunities for others to learn, grow and contribute.

Leaders with strong creative competencies are also forward-thinking and tend to envision the big picture -- such as realizing the store's best advantage regarding new opportunities in fuel, foodservice offerings and grassroots advocacy -- understanding how all the pieces fit together and recognizing that sometimes the results of their actions now might not be seen for months later. They are decisive and maintain a strategic focus, even in the face of distracting winds that would blow to break them.

Authenticity is a key competency of successful c-store leaders. Authenticity allows the leader to be seen as both honest and credible, which is the key to the leader's ability to influence others. Authenticity is also what propels the effective leader to speak courageously about issues that cause others to shrink or hide.

The competency that is the keystone to all others is self-awareness. A highly developed sense of self-awareness is what allows a leader to see his or her own strengths and weaknesses objectively, to engage in necessary self-development, and to understand and manage one's impulses and reactive tendencies.

For reactive tendencies, those natural fall-back positions in times of stress or uncertainty (such as being overly compliant or excessively perfectionistic) challenge a leader's ability to fully develop and use their creative competencies. These tendencies are reactive patterns of behavior that can potentially derail a leader's effectiveness.

At times, reactive tendencies can be the "dark side" of under-developed creative competencies. For instance, a leader that tends to allow unacceptable staff behavior on the premise of keeping the peace might think to be doing it to maintain good relationships. In reality, the leader is exhibiting a passive tendency that challenges his or her ability to simultaneously achieve business results or to be perceived as being credible.

Other reactive tendencies might include being overly critical or driven, either one of which might be confused as focusing on producing results, but both of which are reactive tendencies that damage a leader's ability to strengthen his or her relationship competencies.

To build creative competencies and keep reactive tendencies at bay, especially during times of stress when one becomes most vulnerable to falling back on reactive tendencies, it's important to first recognize one's reactive tendencies and creative competencies and then, undertake a leadership development plan targeted at simultaneously building competencies and minimizing reactive behavior.

Even though it can be a challenge, taking time out for their own leadership development will allow c-store leaders to foster a creative pause that directs them to focus internally rather than externally, on being rather than doing. That's the type of leadership that needs to be encouraged and augments a leader's ability to stand tall, even after the worst storms.

*Marie Peeler is a principal of Peeler Associates, a Pembroke, Mass.-based organization that helps leaders clarify objectives, find engagement, improve interpersonal effectiveness and attain their goals. As an executive coach and leadership development consultant, Peeler has worked with individuals and organizations to increase their business effectiveness through true and lasting transformation. For more information, visit [www.peelerassociates.com](http://www.peelerassociates.com).*

**Editor's note:** The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of *Convenience Store News*.

© 2012 Stagnito Media.

**URL at time of publication:** [http://www.csnews.com/print-topstory-cover\\_story\\_bonus\\_\\_key\\_to\\_leadership\\_is\\_blowing\\_in\\_the\\_wind\\_-61540.html](http://www.csnews.com/print-topstory-cover_story_bonus__key_to_leadership_is_blowing_in_the_wind_-61540.html)