

WHEN THE RIGHT CHOICE — HIRING A VETERAN — IS WRONG

BOY, THAT HEADLINE DOESN'T EVEN LOOK RIGHT, DOES IT? BEFORE WE GO ANY FURTHER, LET'S GET IT STRAIGHT. EVERYONE KNOWS THAT IT'S GOOD AND IMPORTANT TO HIRE VETERANS, BUT WE NEED TO GET PAST THE POLITICALLY CORRECT SPEAK AND LOOK AT WHETHER IT'S GOOD FOR YOU. LET'S LISTEN TO A VETERAN WHO IS ALSO THE TEAM LEADER OF OUR COACHES AT ATI, GEORGE ZEEKS:

BY CHRIS "CHUBBY" FREDERICK | CONTRIBUTOR

I HAVE dealt with shop owners for more than 30 years now, and the one thing almost every one of them had in common was how they hired people. If you lose an "A" technician, or even a "B" technician for that matter, with what skill level do you want to replace them? That's right, an "A" tech. If you lost a seasoned manager or service advisor, who do you want to replace them? Someone with years of experience, so you can just plug and play.

The biggest problem with that is the really great person who has all those years of experience may not be available right now, when you need them. If you can change the way you think, for just a moment, you begin to see why veterans can be one of the smartest hires you've ever made. That is, if you have the right things in place.

When I first started in automotive, I didn't know anything about cars. I didn't know how to change oil. I had no idea what was involved in diagnosing problems. I didn't even take very good care of my own car. It just never seemed that important to me. I had graduated from college with a degree in marketing and promptly joined the



Army. I had a great time, but the skills I learned in the Army had no value in the business world — or so I thought.

I stumbled into the automotive world by selling this guy a sprinkler system for his lawn. We walked his lawn, where I had placed my little flags showing the position of the proposed system, and sat down for the next two hours to discuss the particulars of the deal. At that point, he said, "I have to

think about it."

Knowing that I was the third person to talk to him, I wasn't ready to leave my commission to chance. I took my jacket off, asked his wife for a cup of coffee and she and I began to talk. He again mentioned wanting to think about it. I told him to go right ahead, since I was having such a great conversation with his wife.

An hour and one big check later, the deal was done. He then asked what I knew about cars, and if I would be willing to come and run one of his auto shops. He owned five at the time.

I thought he was insane and told him I knew nothing about cars or auto shops. I wasn't sure I even wanted to learn. That's when he started selling me. It was the beginning of my next 30 years.

Are you ready to teach them?

I tell you that story to prepare you for the rest of this one. You see, he knew



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business and saw something in me that I didn't. He hired for basic sales skill and attitude. He knew that he and the crew could teach me the industry knowledge that I would need, but if you don't have the attitude to win, it just doesn't matter.

Once veterans leave their branch of service, they can be a bit lost at first. They may not be sure of what they want to do, but they know how to learn. The military is very good at constantly teaching and refining skill sets, so they are ready and willing to learn new skills.

The real question is, are you ready to teach them? Do you, or can you, have systems in place to teach them what they need to know? By the way, you should have this in place anyway for all of your staff.

The challenge becomes one of commitment. Veterans will commit to you, because they want to get started on their new careers, but you have to really commit to them and their education in your field. They also know what halfhearted attempts look like.

There is a learning curve, but it's not as steep as you might think. Whether it's the sales side or the technical side, the attitude and life experience a veteran brings to the table will have a positive impact on the rest of your team.



Are you ready to lead them?

The next challenge is for you to lead them. Veterans know what hard work is. They know the importance of getting a mission accomplished. They can also sniff out a poor leader in a heartbeat. They have had good ones and bad ones, and they know the difference. A poor leader to them means frustration, disappointment and things just ending up being harder than they should be.

It's not a matter of your leadership style. You don't have to be Patton to get them to follow you, but you do have to care. What does that look like? Simon Sinek has a great book out called *Leaders Eat Last*, which would be a great place to start. If your philosophy is that everything is all about you, then you're in trouble no matter who you hire. A veteran has seen that leader before and will head for the hills.

If you care about your people, their success, their growth and their happiness, then they will try to perform miracles for you. The basic facts are

that they know what sacrifice is; they have done it and are willing to do it again. This means you have to live up to that standard. The reward for you is huge, satisfying and profitable. It just takes a little hard work on your part, but everyone, including yourself, will be better for it.

Now, back to that headline. It all boils down to pride. Almost every veteran I have met is proud of their branch, their service and themselves. They want that from you. I have worked in shops, but not for long, where I would make sure to take off my work shirt before I left the shop. You see, I had no pride in that shop and didn't want people to know that I had anything to do with it. I know that part of that comes back to me as the manager of the shop, but I can only do what the shop owner allows.

If you can give a veteran an environment that they can be proud of, a leader they can be proud of and work they can be proud of, then hire away and reap the rewards. If you at least try, they will help you become better. If you don't care or care only about yourself, then don't even try to hire a veteran. They'll know who you are, even if you don't. *TL*




Chris "Chubby" Frederick is the CEO and founder of the Automotive Training Institute. ATI's 108 associates train and coach more than 1,150 shop owners every week across North America to drive profits and dreams home to their families. ATI associates love helping shop owners who are having the same struggle as many of them have had, and who are looking for the same answers — and in some cases looking for a lifeline. This month's article was written by George Zeeks, a veteran and the team leader to one of ATI's coaching teams.

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