# Loyalty

As I look back at my old *Editor's Letter* columns, it's depressing how many of them address the terrible economy. For example, in the March/April 2010 *Editor's Letter*, I wrote about the closing of Warren Lumber, the lumberyard and millwork shop in New Jersey where I had worked for three years before going out on my own. A number of my old friends lost their jobs, and it pained me to think of those buildings sitting empty, where I'd once happily schlepped doors and windows. It had been a good place, with management who cared about the employees and employees who felt good about their work. Sadly, most of the original owners are dead now, part of the passing of the World War II generation. But they established an institution that had my loyalty and that of a lot of other former employees and customers.

This summer, I've spent a lot of time back in my home town. It's been work and not pleasure, as I'm fixing up the house where I grew up so I can rent it out. While I was there, one of my old Warren Lumber buddies stopped by to help, and he told me a rare piece of economic good news. Some former employees have rented what had been the Warren Lumber Door Shop building and started up a new millwork company.

This bit of optimism delighted me, and I dropped in to indulge my nostalgia. When I walked into the office, the first person who saw me said my name in surprise. It took me a second to recognize him across 15 years, and then I realized it was Rob, a fellow I'd hired as a helper when I was a carpenter and he was fresh out of high school. Rob and I built a lot of decks and trimmed a lot of houses together, but the economy slowed in the early '90s, and I had to lay him off. When I did that, I helped him get in at Warren Lumber, and he worked there until it closed. Turns out he married the girl he'd been dating when he worked for me, and they've now got kids who are in high school.

Rob and I chatted for a few minutes, then he took me in to see Kevin, the owner. Kevin and I had first met 20 years ago when he took over managing the lumberyard. Both of us were new dads then, which gave us a lot in common. Now, both of us are paying college tuition. Kevin told me how he came to start up this venture, and he took the time from his day to give me a 15-minute tour. I knew almost all of the employees. One of them I'd last seen when he was still in diapers. He didn't know me, of course, but I was a friend to both his parents and his grandparents. Looking around, the shop was little changed. I could have gone right back to work there, and it briefly occurred to me to ask for my old job. It felt like something was right with this corner of the world.

Kevin told me a little about his business philosophy and how he'd gotten back some of the old Warren Lumber accounts. One story in particular stuck with me. He'd called a contractor, told him who he was and what he was about, and asked for the man's business. The contractor said something like, "You guys were the first people to give me an account when I started out. If you're selling, I'm not buying anywhere else." Loyalty. You can't buy it. You have to earn it continually. But there are few more valuable or lasting assets a business can have.

Andy Engel
Editor

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