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Not Fit For Print — “I Am Not A Crook”

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Many of us can recall the day **President Richard Nixon** stood before the nation and uttered those famous words. The very fact of his saying that he wasn't a crook was proof enough to many people that he probably was. In fact, most of the time when someone protests their innocence, we suspect, at some level anyway, that he really must be guilty of something. You see, for the vast majority of us law abiding citizens, we are fairly certain that where there is smoke there is at least a glowing ember, if not a raging fire. There is a simple explanation for this, and it is that something approximating one half of one percent of Americans are actually lawbreakers and the rest of us are honest. Of a population of over 250,000,000, only about one million are in jail. Oh sure, not everyone gets caught for every crime, but eventually most bad guys get caught for something.

So, why is it that so many places insist on treating their customers like crooks? For example, I paid cash for a coffee maker and it didn't work. I asked for my money back. I had paid cash, had a receipt, their product was defective, and I had been inconvenienced by having to drive back to the store, but I had to produce a driver's license and be entered into their computer in order to obtain a refund. Now you know they didn't need an ID when they took my cash, so I asked why they needed it now. I was told, no surprise, “it is just our policy.” Not being a Washington policy wonk, I asked why they had such a policy and where could I see this policy. You probably won't be too stunned to find that the clerk didn't know where the policy was kept and refused to explain it to me. A call for a supervisor was fruitless, none were on duty but another presumably more senior staffer told me it was for security purposes that I would have to give them my name and address and a photo ID. “SECURITY?!” I yelled, “I'm trying to return a faulty product not steal the damn thing. What does security have to do with this?”

The answer isn't as obvious as you might think. You see the store, like many organizations, is constantly on the alert for that one half percent. They were treating me like part of an organized group of thieves who steal merchandise and then return it for cash. How do they get the receipts? After all, I had a valid cash receipt. Well, they work through a dishonest employee who provides them with phony receipts, so at least some of the crooks are on the inside. “I am not a crook,” I found myself saying to this person who was now probably sure that I was indeed a crook. What a dilemma! Ei-

ther I relented and had my name added to a list of suspected crooks, or I just accepted the broken product and went somewhere else.

Policies, procedures and people....

They, like other good soldiers before them, were just carrying out policy. They couldn't show me the policy because it was related to security issues. The people, using their internal procedure and adhering to proper policy had infuriated me. They weren't the only ones who do this, so I went on a quest. I found those offensive price stickers that only come off the glass of a picture frame with dynamite. They were also to keep crooks from switching prices. I was told, “you could have switched this price with a lower one.” Once again the assumption was that I might be a crook, and it was their job to protect me from my latent instincts. Never mind that the most common complaint in this store was that lots of their merchandise had no prices on the item and the poor customer had to wait until a clerk could be found to go back and check the price. I suppose they feel they can at least inconvenience all those crooks waiting at their cash registers if they can't actually catch them, but shouldn't they feel just a bit uncomfortable in the midst of that criminal element? How does it feel to work in an environment where you see a crook in every aisle? How about all those inside collaborators busy preparing fake receipts? What a scary place to work.

Failing Organizations

When it becomes easier to fall back on rigid policies and procedures than to go forward with personal service, it is often a sign of a place in trouble. When you begin to treat every customer like a criminal, maybe you have attracted them as vultures flock to a dying beast. This can be true for stores, for banks, for even well-intended guardians of the public trust such as libraries. Maybe there are

valid reasons to have burglar strips in every book and item complete with the upright sentinels guarding the doorway. Maybe you need some basic policies to carry out your mission, but don't you want to be sure they benefit your customer? Not run them off! How do you

treat someone who inadvertently walks through the security system with an unchecked item? Most libraries are downright loose, so maybe I am preaching to the choir, but policies have a way of creeping up on you and accomplishing less than you want. Sometimes they do the opposite. Marketing literature talks about the four “P's” of success and I am concerned about the three P's of failure--policies, procedures and people. Policies should never be something to fall back on mindlessly. They should be understood and be sensible and structured so that someone can overrule them on occasion. Procedures are often just ways of slowing things down and propping up bad policy. They are also a way of limiting people rather than guiding them to better personal service and care. After all, if each item in your library is different and each customer is unique, then how can one policy or procedure fit them all?

What is Your Policy?

You don't loan certain reference books. That is your policy. I, however, need a book for just overnight. It is a book valued at \$20, two years old and not from your ready reference desk. I offer to leave a crisp \$100 bill along with a promise to return the book the minute you open in the morning. What do you say? Does my credibility depend on my being a faculty member or a student? Do you have to know who I am? How much ID do I have to produce? Will just my usual library card suffice? How many of you would be tempted to tell me it isn't just the cost of the book but also the procedures required to replace a missing book? Ordering, cataloging, accounting all cost more than the book, but do you actually know what the real cost of these operations are, and, if it is more or less than \$100, would you just stick to the safe and sure enforcement of your policy? Would you wonder if I was trying to put one over on you but you just can't figure out my game? How many of you would be fairly certain I was really just a common crook and you would never see the book again? Would anybody want to know what price I put on the value of the information I needed and why I was willing to put up the \$100? Knowing that might help you select materials and help a customer. Or will the policy win out in the end? Will a supervisor empowered to make the decision be on duty at closing time or will I relive the coffee pot problem? Will you allow me to leave with a smile of wonderment on my face or protesting that I am not a crook? Is it time to take a hard look at your policies and procedures and make sure they lean in favor of superior service and not just job ease and comfort?