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Windows in the Rain

by Rushworth M. Kidder

Aren't there any good-news stories about corporate ethics?

I got thinking about that last week when, to escape a blistering late-afternoon thunderstorm, we tied up our boat at a marina on a nearby island. It was after-hours, and several of the staff were waiting out the downpour on the porch before heading home in their boats. So we joined them. From our vantage, we could see the clouds boiling overhead and the harbor slowly fading behind the rain. When the storm finally hit, we retreated inside -- six adults, a boy, and two dogs -- to watch through the windows.

I've had some fascinating conversations with strangers while waiting out storms, and this was no exception. Maybe it's that a storm overwhelms our petty human wills, forcing us to reschedule the living date-book we call our lives. Maybe it's that our collective vulnerability makes our commonalities seem more obvious, so that it's harder not to need each other. And maybe it's that what sustains the moment is conversation, as engaging and unpredictable -- and yet as purposeful -- as the storm howling outside.

I found myself standing by a window with a man who had spent his life as a homebuilder. With typical Yankee canniness, he found out soon enough what I did for a living. Perhaps because of our location -- with the rain pelting the glass but making no inroads into the room -- we found ourselves talking about the ethics of windows.

He'd been installing them, he told me, for decades. And he'd always gone back to the same company, Andersen Windows -- not only because of the quality of the product and their twenty-year guarantee, but because of their commitment to keeping their word. Again and again, he said, that choice paid off.

He recalled building a house not long ago where, as they sat on sawhorses eating lunch one day, a large windowpane suddenly snapped from top to bottom in a lightning-shaped crack. Over the weekend, two more did the same thing. Turned out, he said, that the company had used a bad lot of glass. Andersen replaced every one of the windows, no questions asked.

He also told me about a house where over time the windows began taking on an odd tint. When the owner called to complain, he phoned the Andersen representative. All the company wanted to know was the measurement of every bad window. A couple of weeks later, he said, a truck rumbled into the driveway. Two men got out in suits and ties, pulled on their coveralls, unloaded their freight, and set about replacing every bad window. As they left, they handed the dumbfounded owner a packet of window-

cleaning cloths, a gallon of cleaner, and a long-handled squeegee -- just by way of thanks.

But his most recent experience was the most thought provoking. Back in 1983, he said, he built a summer cottage on an island for a "really nice guy" and his family, and they'd stayed in touch ever since. Last year, the windows began fogging up. My friend wasn't able to get out to check them right away. Meanwhile, the owner got an estimate from another company, which grimly informed him that he'd have to rip out the old frames and redo the beautiful interior pine trim and the well-weathered outside shingles -- all at considerable expense.

So this spring my friend went out to count and measure the windows. He also wrote down the number on every pane of glass. Each number included an "83" -- the year the house was built, and now one year beyond the 20-year warrantee.

"Are you sure that number was 83 and not 84?" asked the representative at the lumber yard when he called them in. "Sometimes the light is funny, and a four can look like a three. Why don't you go look again?"

It was meant as a helpful suggestion. And it could have saved a bundle of money for the owner. But it wasn't right, and the contractor knew it. "No," he said, sighing as he told me, "it was 83."

He didn't hear anything for a while. Then the representative called back. He'd added up the purchases this contractor had made with Andersen over the years. It came to over a million dollars. The replacement windows for the owners' cottage were on their way, free.

Lessons? There must be dozens, but I see four. First, when you let people know you're interested in ethics, you hear great tales. Second, it takes integrity to stay with what's right -- especially when, through a tiny shift in your reporting, you think you could save thousands of dollars for a friend.

So why did the contractor hold his position and not lie about that number? That goes to the third lesson. It's all about corporate America, which (as readers of *Ethics Newsline* know) has been taking a beating over integrity issues. This lesson suggests that when you build a company on quality, service, and ethics, you build loyalties that last far beyond the life of your product. There's another company he could go to, my friend said, selling pretty good windows for less. But he's not budging.

And that's lesson four, which is that what goes around comes around. The company's ethics brought out an ethical response -- even in the face of great temptation. My friend didn't try to put something over on the manufacturer. And in the end he didn't have to. That's a story worth getting rained out to hear.