

Leadership through Servitude

by Kim Nimon, PhD and S. Kristine Farmer, MS, RP, PHR

In February, Kristine and I had the opportunity to attend the monthly luncheon of DallasHR, an affiliate of the Society for Human Resource Management. Featured speakers, Henry Rogers and Chris Willis, presented how Interstate Batteries integrates servant leadership into their corporate culture and operations. During the luncheon, Henry Rogers shared his experiences as Corporate Chaplain, and Chris Willis discussed how as Vice President of Human Resources and General Counsel, he models servant leadership. They presented listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, and commitment of growth of people as characteristics of servant leadership that were instrumental to Interstate's mission and philosophy statements (see below):

Interstate's Mission:

To glorify God as we supply our customers worldwide with top quality, value-priced batteries, related electrical power-source products and services, and distribution services. Further, our mission is to provide our partners and associates with opportunities which are profitable, rewarding, and growth-oriented.

Interstate's Philosophy:

Interstate Batteries' business philosophy is to treat others as they want to be treated: treating all of their business associates with respect, fairness, and integrity; caring for and listening to them; professionally serving them; always being a model of working hard and striving hard for excellence.

We interviewed Henry and Chris to learn more about their corporate chaplain program, as it appeared to be somewhat unique from the corporate chaplain programs that I have reviewed in the past (see Nimon, 2009). In this column, we present our interview with Henry Rogers and in the Fall column we will present our interview with Chris Willis. How does a privately-held corporation with revenues in the billions, serve its team members and customers based on "old-fashioned business principles?" We asked the following questions to gain a deeper insight into this unique company.

Kim: *Can you tell me a little about your background and how you came to be a corporate chaplain? I notice that you have a staff to support your clerical duties. Can you describe what services your office provides to Interstate employees and how your staff has been trained to accomplish its goals?*

Henry: I was introduced to Interstate Batteries by a friend who was serving with me in the infantry in the Army. While I had not considered leaving the Army, I was intrigued because Interstate Batteries' business philosophy was structured around Luke 6:31, treating others as you want to be treated. I interviewed on two separate occasions for two separate positions. I was ultimately offered the position of training manager and served in that role from 1992 until 1998. During that time, I participated in most of Interstate's

ministry opportunities and the Chaplain often referred to me as his "Elder" because I regularly brought donuts to the Bible study meetings. When the Chaplain decided to leave Interstate, I was originally going to fill in for him until his replacement could be found. Much to my surprise, the Chairman offered me the job as Corporate Chaplain and I have been serving in this role since 1998. Although most corporate chaplains are usually seminary trained, I received my training and ordination from my church.

We have a staff of four, including myself. A seminary student from the Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) typically serves as an assistant chaplain while they are studying at DTS and serves in that role for up to one year after graduation. I also have an assistant, who focuses on internal activities including luncheons, clothing drives, and volunteer activities. Finally, we have another staff member who focuses on external activities which is primarily corporate giving.

Kim: *Interstate's website indicates that part of your corporate culture includes providing opportunities for people within and also outside your company for "Bible study, prayer, and Christian mission". It further indicates that while it is not necessary to be a Christian to be employed, Christian mission is a part of the daily work life for Interstate team members. Can you describe how Interstate team members embrace Christianity as part of their daily work lives? How does this work for non-Christian employees?*

Henry: Our Christian mission is a three-legged stool. The first leg is the ministry of team members, the second is ministry with team members, and the third is our corporate giving program.

Our ministry of team members involves spending time with team members when they need someone to talk to. Should they need the services of a counselor, Interstate has relationships with counselors all over the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Because we embrace and love all team members, we want to help with their care. To this end, Interstate covers 80% of counseling costs for team members. We also provide opportunities for team members to attend marriage conferences. For example, Interstate pays 50% of the fees and hotel costs associated with attending a local marriage conference. Interstate also serves team members' children and pays 50% of camp costs.

Our ministry with team members involves events such as serving at Union Gospel Mission, or working together to feed the homeless. Team members also go on mission trips to countries such as Mexico, Africa, Hungary, Moldova, and Russia. You do not have to be a Christian to help with our volunteer and mission work. If a team member is not a Christian, then we assign tasks and projects with that in mind. If I know a team member is a Christian, then he or she may be asked to share the Gospel.

Interstate recognizes that we have been blessed by God. In our corporate giving program, we give back to God a portion of what He has blessed us with, and the bulk of our giving is to Christian missions.

Interstate operates by Biblical principles, such as treating others with respect and concern. If you operate by Biblical principles, then you love people that you work with, and you do it in tangible ways. We love all people in the workplace, irrespective of their religious or spiritual affiliations. Regardless of faith background, if I know you need help, then I work to get you the help you need.

Kim: *I understand that Interstate regularly offers “equipping luncheons” featuring a Christian speaker. Can you tell me how many of your employees attend these luncheons and what have you perceived as the benefits to the employees and to the organization?*

Henry: We usually have 80 to 100 team members attend our monthly luncheons. More employees have attended for named speakers such as Tom Landry, Chuck Swindoll, and Tony Evans. Our luncheons are free and totally optional. The benefits of the luncheons are varied: (a) we get to spend time with organizations and people that Interstate supports financially; (b) the speakers typically present an encouraging and uplifting message that many team members need to hear; and (c) our team members get a nice meal and break from a busy day.

Kim: *Interstate’s website mentions that it holds a prayer breakfast in conjunction with the National Day of Prayer and the Congressional Prayer Breakfast. What other opportunities are there for employees to join in prayer on a daily basis? Does the company, for example, host a prayer room where employees can go to pray or meditate? Are there prayer lists or email groups?*

Henry: Our office does not have a dedicated prayer room. Many of our employees are comfortable praying anywhere in the office. We open our company wide meetings with prayer and send prayer requests via email. If a team member has a prayer need, he or she sends that request to the chaplain department. We then send out an email and ask team members to pray. Emails are sent based on need, so there may be multiple requests in a day or over the course of the week. We find that team members embrace the opportunity to pray as it serves to connect and humanize us.

Kim: *It sounds like you function as a conduit as you provide care for the whole company, which is a very unique model. In comparison to other models that I have researched, I think you have a model where it is not just one person, or even your 4 member team, serving the role as corporate chaplain. Your team is very critical to what you do, but you are facilitating the opportunity for everyone in the company to serve each other.*

Henry: If we were the only four who embraced the task of employee care, our impact would be limited. Most team members embrace our company culture and serve one another. Our department tries to make it easy for people to show they care. For example, we provide team members cards and postage so that can send a card anytime they want.

Kim: *I would like to ask you a question that I posed to a chaplain from Marketplace Ministries (see Nimon, 2009): While some may feel that religion does not belong in the workplace, the reality is that employers*

have the right to exercise their religion in operating their businesses. I noticed that Interstate Batteries includes God in its mission statement. In your experience, is there a difference in the role that you serve for companies whose leadership exercises religion in operating their businesses and those that do not? What challenges are there in serving employees whose faith system is different than yours?

Henry: The philosophy of our ministry is mission first and people always. It makes business sense to do the things that we do here. We treat all team members the same way no matter their religious preference. We have Muslims, Hindus, Atheists, Buddhists, and we treat them exactly the same way. Serving Christ in the workplace is not about pushing religion on team members, it is about loving people.

I do not see any tension with what I do and I believe I could take our approach into any company in America, where it would make good business sense. If there were to be any tension, I suspect it would be during our orientation, when we provide new employee packets. In that packet, Interstate gives new employees a reading light, Interstate items (e.g., koozies, stickers), as well as a copy of the Bible, the Jesus film, and More than a Carpenter. In my 16 years in this role, I have only had one person return the Bible to me.

References

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KIM NIMON, PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of North Texas, where the main tenet of her research agenda focuses on improving human performance through the practice of workplace spirituality. She became aware of corporate chaplaincy programs during her doctoral studies and began researching how they fit within the larger context of workplace spirituality. Her research on workplace chaplains has been published by the *Journal of Management, Spirituality, & Religion* and the *International Society for Performance Improvement*.



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