

# CARSIDE MANNER



What I'm about to do is risky business. I want to give credit where credit is due to an old friend. The risk involved has to do with the fact that this old friend is known better to me than he is to you. It's a personal matter. And personal matters need to go a bit further to prove their point. I'll do my best to show relevance. The lessons he taught me were taught the

best way, by example, not by words. The impression left by those lessons has stayed with me to a degree he himself will surely find surprising when he reads this. It is the lessons, more than the man, that I wish to share.

The man's name was, and still is, Bill Davis.

I remember the day I applied for the job. He was the shop foreman at a large shop. He interviewed me with a friendly but frank attitude. Then he gave me tests. Tests of basic math skills. Tests of basic intelligence (very risky business). Tests of aptitude. And since I wasn't yet ASE certified, he made me take all the trial ASE tests, to boot.

After he graded the tests, he informed me that he was interested in hiring me as a line technician. But he was careful to spell out the rules of employment. His expectations were high, and clearly stated. Again the talk was friendly. But there was no doubt in my mind when we'd finished that I was about to go to work for a man who tolerated no crap.

Once I'd actually gone to work, it didn't take me long to figure out that the guy was the genuine article. Never one to say "Go get 'em boys," he was more apt to lead the way by example. He knew how to run work through the shop and make tough decisions. He also knew how to roll up his sleeves when it mattered.

About a month after I'd started, he called me into the office to inform me that a customer had filed a complaint against my work. No screaming. No big fuss. He just wanted me to know what was going on. He accused me of nothing. He promised nothing.

The complaint turned out to be one of those groundless fits of consumer anger aimed at who knows what or whom. Bill was equally prompt in informing me of my exoneration. It was done on a personal basis. In private.

Later that month, I was thrown into a job for which I had no training—and no previous experience to guide me. It was rough. I went into the job with an attitude of uncertainty and apprehension.

But Bill had this crazy pet phrase which I found strangely appealing. He would assume a posture similar to that of a twangy country music singer, and with intentional bad grammar exclaim, "There ain't a horse that can't be rode, or a car that can't be fixed!"

Hey. Who am I? Davis says it's so. We all know HE can do it. So what if this is a nightmare job and I got it. If Davis can do it, so can I.

Wrong.

My struggles did not go unnoticed. He watched from a distance until he decided that I had lost my perspective, and that I was trying to "gut" my way through the job. He'd seen this happen to others before. I had become my own worst enemy.

He wandered over, casual as all get out. He smiled and said, "I want to see you for a minute." Then he climbed into the driver's seat of the car and motioned for me to sit in the passenger's seat. He inserted a loud, fairly crazy comedy tape into the car's cassette player, and started laughing from the first joke. Not one of your wimpy, half-hearted laughs. It was a man's laugh, full blown, straight from the gut. Contagious.

It worked. We ended up laughing so hard that other techs actually stopped and wondered what was going on. As soon as I had relaxed a bit he shut off the tape. Then he smiled again and said, "Can I give you a hand with this job?"

Within the hour, the car was running.

Now some of you may wonder what this has to do with customer satisfaction, which is what the Carside Manner column was originally designed to talk about.

The answer is simple. The answer is People. Technicians. Technicians who are People. They have their good days and their bad days. But the Bill Davis type people are the ones who understand that, and make adjustments. They realize that the biggest asset of any good company will always be the people who deliver good product. And sometimes those people need a laugh in a dark moment, a helping hand that goes beyond a quick "atta boy," and leadership that goes beyond talk.

Thanks, Bill. Sorry it took so long.

*This will be the last Carside Manner. I am leaving to pursue other interests (risky business again). My contributed articles will continue to appear in these pages, with your kind permission. Thanks to all of you who have selflessly shared your time and energies over the past five-and-a-half years. God bless.*

**Ralph Birnbaum**