

# OUR STORY



My first week on the job I was told to immediately lay off 15 engineers. I was also directed to “discipline” two employees for policy infractions. You see, supervisors and managers weren’t trusted to have such sensitive interactions. That Friday night I had a date with someone I had just met. Thinking he was about to embark on a casual conversation he asked, “So how was your first week?” I paused for a few seconds and then burst into tears (how embarrassing). I had pursued a career in human resources because I believed that people deserved to be respected and feel a sense of value and accomplishment from their work. Now, eight years later, I still felt powerless to make any substantial positive changes in the work lives of the people I served.

Soon after that the company hired a new Labor and Employee Relations director. I could immediately see that Ken was different from other HR executives I had met and worked with. He came from a large manufacturing and construction company headquartered in Chicago. There he had developed a very non-traditional approach to leadership and organizational management. His philosophy was based on his belief that 95% of people are responsible adults, and they want their organization to succeed. He was smart, direct and fearless in an environment that thrived on fear as a tool to keep people in line. Going against all my traditional HR training, Ken’s focus wasn’t on compliance, risk mitigation and discipline. He knew that productivity and profitability would grow through building trust, promoting engagement, giving respect unconditionally, fair treatment of everyone and setting the highest expectations. He believed the single guiding principle in all that we do is simple: Do the Right Thing – Always.

Soon after Ken was hired, I moved to a new position – manager of the corporate training department. While I did not report to directly to him, I took every opportunity to learn from him. The company grew, and as new plants were opened in other parts of the country, Ken’s Positive Employee Philosophy approach was integrated into the culture and management system from the start. All employees in these start-ups were salaried. They had keys that opened every door in the building. They hired their peers. They were expected to solve problems, make decisions and be innovative. The new plants began to outperform the 30-year-old, traditionally-managed plants by 200%, even though they were still on their learning curve. Going against traditional policy, all employees were paid for reasonable absences (a benefit generally only given to management), yet employee attendance was over 98% and turnover was under 4%. Management was carefully selected to ensure they were capable of, and passionate about, this exciting philosophy. And my team began to regularly train these leaders in this groundbreaking approach.

In my eighth year working for a large aerospace contractor in Southern California, I had settled into a culture that was, well, barbaric. The massive site sat on a hundred acres and employed over 8,000 people. The “Walk of Shame” was the moniker employees had coined for the weekly management tours that took place in the plant. Supervisors and employees were regularly lectured and demeaned in full display of tour participants. And there were three classes of people: senior managers with company cars who ate lunch in an executive dining room, middle managers and supervisors who did exactly as they were directed, and skilled employees who were most often treated as replaceable or even non-essential parts.

Now, finally, the vision I had believed in – of the kind of work-life people could experience – was coming to fruition. I was passionate about helping both new and experienced leaders see people at every level as peers who should be respected and valued. We created an intensive leadership workshop designed to impact the hearts and minds of the management participants. This was the key to its success because most leaders were steeped in the traditional, autocratic approaches from the past. High Performance Leadership Workshop participants loved the philosophy. They regularly noted how it changed their thought process and how they felt about their work and the workplace, their team members and themselves. They returned to work with an energy and passion that hadn't been seen and set out to create a new and engaging environment for their teams. They were building high performance teams. Unfortunately, the highest levels of leadership remained the same autocratic, power-based decision-makers. Over time, many of the new leaders became worn down, losing the energy and courage it took to continue.

I was driven to share this incredible approach with other companies. In 1990, I left the aerospace company to pursue that goal. Over the past 30 years, I've had the opportunity to work with courageous and visionary leaders and watch the profound impact they have had on their organizations' cultures and people. As this business grew, we became HPWP (High Performance Work Place) and added talented friends and zealots to our team. We have now trained over 3,000 leaders – most of whom have positively impacted the lives of thousands more. And it's not just that their work lives (and, subsequently, home lives) have improved, but the organizations where they work have experienced continuous performance and profitability growth.

As you read this, I'm a new grandmother and looking at retirement. But the HPWP Group relentlessly continues a great work cultures movement. If you have experienced a toxic work environment or seriously bad management, you know the negative impact it has on business, teammates and families. If you want to be the leader people will remember with admiration, check out our [solutions page](#). Thank you for reading my story.

Postscript: Seven years after leaving the aerospace company Ken and I were married and now live happily between Texas, where our daughter and her family lives, and San Diego.

