

Brought to you by:



"First & Foremost," July 19, 2007

The war for talent

By Ron Kitchens

Chief Executive Officer, Southwest Michigan First

I am writing this column, as I do most of them, sitting in an airplane flying home. This trip is different than most as I am not coming home from a week of meeting with business leaders selling the benefits of the region. Instead, I am coming home from attending along with 22 other family members, my brother John's retirement from the United States Air Force.

For those of you who have never attended a military retirement ceremony, I encourage you to attend one if you have the chance. We in the business world can learn much from how the military recognizes its people.

Not only were eloquent speeches delivered, recognizing the contribution and service by my brother but also recognizing his wife, Kelli, for her commitment to keeping their home fires burning during John's frequent and often long deployments.

The retirement ceremony took place on the bow of the *USS Missouri*, located adjacent to the Arizona Memorial in Pearl Harbor. I can think of very few better places to commemorate the significance of a career. The audience included not just our family and John's commanding officers but also current and former co-workers and their families.

As the ceremony progressed, I found myself wondering why in business, we do not include our employee's families in recognizing the significant mile stone of each of our team members. It seems that every management book these days tells us that meaningful recognition of our staff members is critical to the long term success of our companies. But they fail to discuss the need for the family members to see how much we value their mother or father or even co-workers.

In the race to greatness, talent is the only variable that will ensure long-term success. A critical factor in attaining and retaining that talent is the value the employees and their families put on our companies and the work that we are doing. It is not enough in these days of career mobility - where we ask our people to achieve more in less time with fewer assets - to simply pass out certificates of appreciation at an annual meeting. We must ensure that our reward and recognition processes are regular and significant.

Sitting at the ceremony, I overheard a child of 10 or 12 tell his father, "Dad, I can't wait until your retirement, so I can hear about all the great things you do for America." This from a child who knows that the odds his father will be deployed to one of the war zones very soon spoke volumes to the power of praise and recognition.

What are you doing to inspire your employees and their families that they would go to war for you? Think your company is not at war for talent, for significance and success? Think again.

*Ron Kitchens, www.RonKitchens.com, is CEO of **Southwest Michigan First** in Kalamazoo, the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Venture Fund and a director of the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center. For a daily e-mailed business quote, go to SouthwestMichiganFirst.com and click on the free-subscription link.*