

The 'L' word

Love isn't a word you hear very often in the context of corporate America – except at Southwest Airlines. As one of this country's most successful companies, maybe there is a lesson there.

Terry "Moose" Millard, a former Southwest pilot, spoke at the Nebraska Bankers Association convention last month. His message: love your employees and customers. When I was a kid, I was taught to love my neighbor. I am convinced that success in life is all about how you define your neighbor; Millard was encouraging us to broaden the definition to include those people we encounter at work.

Millard said that Herb Kelleher, Southwest's famous former CEO, built a company on love rather than fear. Millard said that at many companies people don't speak up for fear of making a career-limiting comment.

Millard said Kelleher established an atmosphere of trust at Southwest so that employees were not afraid to speak up.

Kelleher believed that if senior management loves its employees, the employees will be in a better position to love the customer. It is a philosophy that worked, as evidenced by the company's record of profitability during a time when the rest of the airline industry has been in turmoil.

For a manager, loving your employees is probably not much different from what I learned as a kid: treat people with respect, be honest, really listen, respond to their needs. Employees can only pass on what they have been given. If an employee has been given this kind of treatment from a manager, he or she can pass this on to customers. Millard said this is the way it works at Southwest Airlines, now under the direction of CEO Colleen Barrett.

We hear messages like this all the time at industry meetings, only not so overtly. Most of those messages about superior customer service are really messages about loving your customer.

"Treat the customer right" is a euphemism for "love your customer." Although most of us instinctively know this, we need to be reminded over and over because fear so effectively holds most of us back. Fear is the enemy of love. Love requires trust and some degree of self-sacrifice. Fear prevents us from trusting those around us, including our employees and customers. Without trust, none of us would ever sacrifice anything.

Millard's message isn't new, but it is certainly important. While he is not afraid to use the word "love" in an industry setting, I don't think you or I need to worry about saying it. We need to live it. Actions, as we know, speak much louder than words. ❖

