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Doner Advertising's
Timothy A. Blett on why
you get two points for
the idea but eight for
the execution

FAST LANE

How making coffee and
wiping the toilet seat
create employee buy-in
for Rob Ukropina at
Overnite Express

A portrait of Mike Hayde, a middle-aged man with short brown hair and a mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light purple shirt, and a yellow patterned tie. He is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera.

Defining values

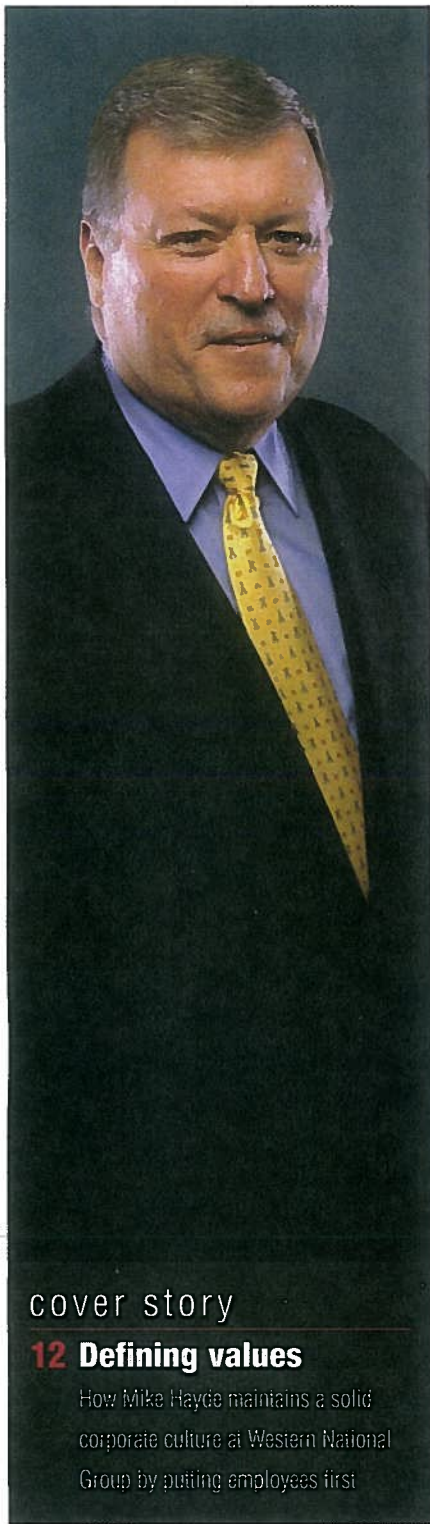
How Mike Hayde maintains
a solid corporate culture at
Western National Group by
putting employees first

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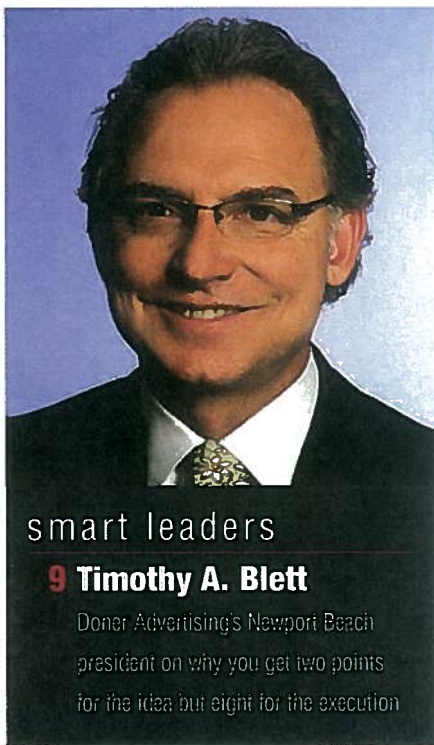
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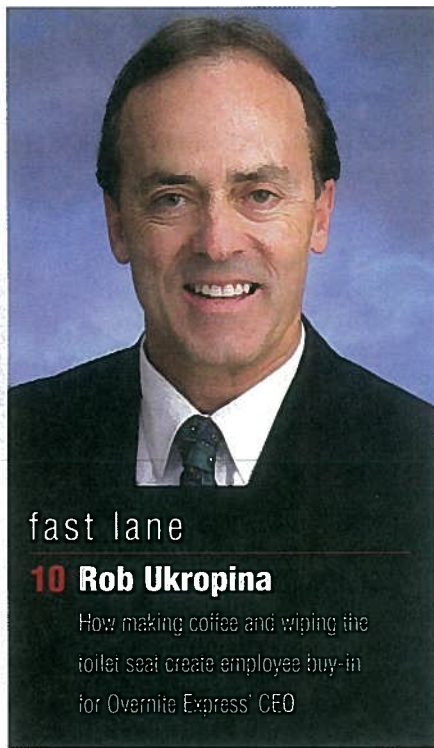
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Playing his part

How Rob Ukropina has grown Overnite Express by admitting his employees know more than he does **By Mark Scott**

As founder and CEO of Overnite Express, Rob Ukropina has as good a sense as anyone about where he'd like the regional delivery company to go and what needs to be done to get it there.

But Ukropina says it would be foolish to think that his knowledge of the company matches the collective wisdom of the company's 250 employees.

"I'm one of 250 now, so I only have 1/250 experience in this business this year," Ukropina says. "So who has got more experience this year? I'd say the 249 other people have more experience than me. How could I be arrogant enough to think that I have more experience in my one little year here versus 249 years? It's just absurd."

By taking a humble view of himself and his role in the company, Ukropina has developed a culture of participatory management where everyone shares in the company's future, leading to 2006 revenue of \$20 million with an annual average growth rate of about 15 percent.

Smart Business spoke with Ukropina about making your employees feel important.

Q: How do you identify leaders?

If you run an authoritarian, top-down company, you're not letting anybody grow and make mistakes. You're not going to know who the leaders are. By being totally participatory and letting people make mistakes and grow, the leaders are going to emerge. You let people grow up through the organization and leaders emerge.

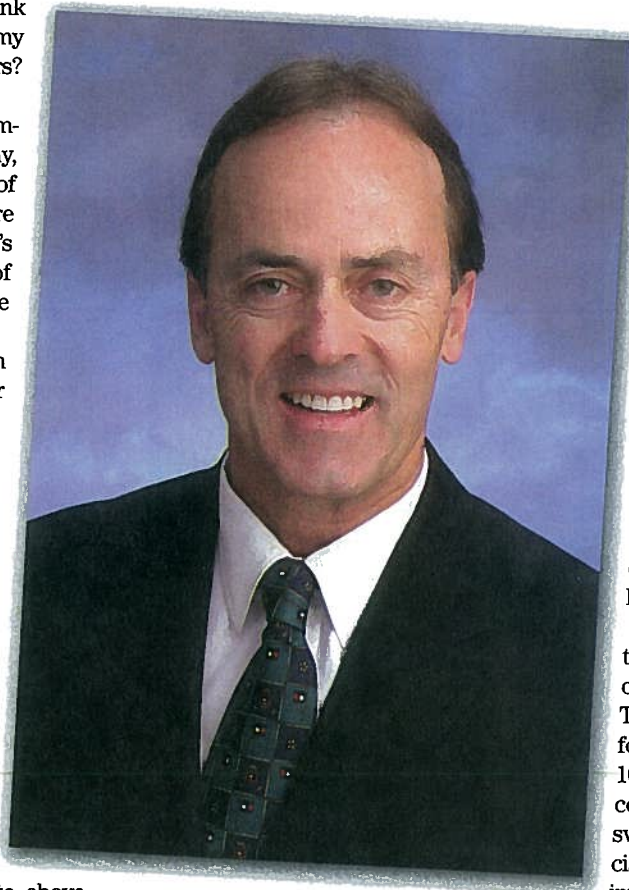
The people doing their jobs know a lot more than the management that they are reporting to above them. If the leadership at each level above them entrusts those people, the quality of the company will come up faster. Those people will feel they participated in the growth of the company, feel good about themselves, and that will continue all the way up.

Q: How do you define participatory management?

Everybody in an organization is affected

by service or product. Some of our best suggestions in marketing come from operations. Some of our best suggestions in accounting come from technology. Some of our best suggestions in technology come from operations.

By practicing it and making it public and constantly communicating that it's happening, it becomes a culture. You have to constantly work on it. Sometimes, it's going to stop at certain levels. I'm going to try to get participatory management on major decisions, but, of course, the CEO obviously has to make a decision.



Q: How do you gauge employee performance?

Everybody needs to define their own benchmarks, and then you go over that with management and everybody agrees that is reasonable and attainable. People in leadership positions, they actually go to their departments and figure out through the associates what the benchmarks should be.

You create the team in that department.

You put together a benchmark. You come back, and we approve it and monitor that on a monthly basis.

Q: What is the biggest mistake a leader can make?

Keeping the wrong person in place too long and being wishful or hopeful that they will rise to the occasion is a very common practice. What happens by leaving the person in the wrong spot is you're telling other people within your team that it's OK to have people that aren't right for the spot.

Q: How can a leader ensure buy-in from employees?

You have to set an example. I was with corporations where the CEO would come in the side door, park his car on the side and had his own bathroom. I park my car in the back, I pick up the cigarette butts on the way in, I wipe the men's toilet seat, and I sit down at my desk. It's really important that the leader has that style.

I made the coffee this morning. I told everyone here I make the best coffee. I think it's all about the top. I think it's all about style and who that CEO is. My biggest excitement every day is seeing a new car in the parking lot. That is really cool.

Letting your associates know that if they have a soccer game, they blow out of here for the kids. They just do that. This business is a means of putting food on your table, but your family is 100 times more important than this company. We show that. The days of the sweatshops are gone. Unless your associates really feel you have their best interest at heart, it's going to be fake.

We don't even say that, we just do it. That's where corporations lose it. If you ask questions and take input that you never do anything about, you really shouldn't have asked in the beginning. Don't ever say or put something in writing if you're not going to do it because it's really bad news.

HOW TO REACH: Overnite Express, (800) 683-7648 or www.overniteexpress.com