

# Horseshoe Nail

by Colonel Dave WEinberg

**W**hat does it mean to *take care of people*? You hear it a lot in everyday conversation. You might even think you do it. But have you ever stopped to think what it really means to *take care of people*? Well, I'm going to give you a few ideas about taking care of people. About *taking care of you* because **you** matter. Then I will talk a bit about problems, because they matter too. Finally I'll give you some more ideas that aren't as neatly packaged in categories like people and problems.

But before I do any of that, let me tell you what Ben Franklin said. (Ben was a pretty smart guy.) He said: *For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of the horse the rider was lost; for want of a rider the battle was lost...And all for the want of a horseshoe nail. Huh?*

What does all this have to do with taking care of people? Go back and read what he said.

Go on. Read it again.

Ben is saying we all matter. We are all *horseshoe nails* and play a part—an important part. We all matter. That's why it's important to take care of people, to deal with the problems and to understand them.

Taking care of people is not a difficult concept. One way is to treat them like people. Don't get caught up with self-importance or rank. Get caught up in people. You know how you feel when someone respects you and treats you like a person. It's a good feeling. A feeling of worth. So why not return the favor—every time you deal with people.

Another way to take care of people is to surprise them. Now, I don't mean hiding around a corner and scaring them. I mean, surprise them—with what they can accomplish. (Huh?) Think about it. If your expectation of people is higher than their expectation of themselves, then you will surprise them with what they can accomplish. They will be stronger by your faith in them. Believe in them. Truly believe in them. They will raise your level of expectation.

To reach those levels, you also have to enthuse them. You have to get excited—get them excited. It's the reverse effect that morning grump has. So get pumped up! Get in their face! Get excited! It's electric!

And when you get the electricity flowing, get out of the way. That's right. One of the best ways to take care of people is to let them do

**Taking care of people is not a difficult concept. One way is to treat them like people. Don't get caught up with self-importance or rank....**

their job. I learned that lesson as a Lieutenant. Upon returning from a conference, I asked by chief of Commercial Services, a crusty Master Sergeant from New England, to teach me how to read the Operating Budget ledger and the Open Document listing that was talked about by several conferees. He pulled the cigar out of his mouth (gives you an idea how long ago I was a Lieutenant!) and said, *If I did that, I'd have to give you my pay check too! And my wife wouldn't like that.* To make a long bewildering story shorter, he said it was his job and sent me back to my office. To this day, I don't know how to read those listings.

Another thing I don't do, is harass my people. (I still do the fun kind of harassment.) There are enough real life harassment's that pop up every day that we don't need to go around making them up. For example, if your people need a rental car, give them a rental car. What are we talking? \$30? \$50? In the whole scheme of things, we are not talking much. You know when they abuse it, so why can't you know when they need it?

But know when to say when. That is, don't try to please everyone. You'll go crazy. As I would try to please everyone earlier in my career, someone left a quote on my desk worthy of sharing. *Cannot tell you the formula for success, but the formula for failure is to try and please everyone.* That was a hard lesson to learn.

An easier lesson that goes a long way in taking care of everyone is remembering the families. That's right. The families are where your people draw their source of strength. If things aren't right at home, they won't be right at work. Now that doesn't mean you should meddle in other people's business, just remember them. Include them.

And remembering them comes easier when you know your people. Sounds like an easy common sense way of taking care of people. Know them. That way, you understand behaviors and you'll be able to help solve and recognize problems.

*So, what's the problem?* Let's explore a bit. Is it really a problem or is it a perception? What's the difference?

There is no difference. If your people come to you with something they perceive to be a problem, whether you think so or not—guess what? It's a problem. And you need to treat it as such. Now, through education or information, you may be able to clear the perception. But don't blow it off, or they might not come back to you when they have a real problem.

Now there is a bit of a trick to solving problems. Make sure you are solving the right one. It doesn't do any good to solve a symptom. Like those dandelions in your front yard—if you don't get to the root of the problem, it won't go away. Pulling the flower or the leaves won't do it. Let's take Airman Joe Bag O'Doughnuts for instance. Joe isn't getting his work done. So you say, Joe, you stay till 10 pm every night until your work is caught up. Sounds like you solved that problem. But what you should know (because you know your people!) is Joe's wife is having a tough time adjusting to her time away from home in a foreign land. And that is really weighing heavily on Joe's mind, which means he can't concentrate on his job. By attacking the symptom, you've probably made the problem worse. Attack a problem at its roots. To help solve Joe's problem, you might talk to another spouse for help, get Mrs Doughnuts involved in a volunteer role on the base (or post), get her enrolled in cultural classes, chaplain, etc. There are many options, once you know what the problem is.

And problems are why we are here. Did you ever think of that? If there weren't problems, they wouldn't need us. That doesn't mean you should cause problems for the job security. What it means is problems are okay. They, by design, are supposed to be here! Understanding that helps to keep your perspective as you attack them.

Now for some other perspectives which don't fit into any particular category, but are worthy of discussion.

# Horseshoe Nail (Continued...)

First discussion item is your career. Don't be guilty of careerism. You'll know you are guilty of it if you are worrying so much about what job you are going to do next that you aren't concentrating on the job you are supposed to be doing now.

While you are doing what you do, you probably get a bit frustrated at times. Or at least, I hope you do. *Frustration is a good thing.* It means you care. If you care, you are willing to learn, which means you will know. If you don't know, you haven't learned so you won't care. If you don't care, you won't be frustrated. The key is to channel your frustration. (Read this again slowly.)

If thinking about that doesn't frustrate you, maybe this will: Treat people differently. *What?* you say. *That's hardly fair.* But think about it. People are different. They are motivated by different things, they have different goals, abilities, likes, and dislikes. Your challenge is to figure all that out and motivate them toward a common goal or mission. Realizing they are different is half the battle. Then work to achieve your consistency in the desired behavioral outcome. What works for one person won't necessarily work for another. Be flexible.

Flexibility is also key to accountability. I recognize that may be a paradigm shift (I just had to use that word!) since it is important to hold people accountable. But hold them accountable if they do something intentionally wrong. You have to be careful here because people must be allowed to make mistakes. If you don't allow mistakes, people will stop taking risks—then your organization will be standing still. Another important thing your organization needs is synergy. That's a neat word that can really be a source of power for your people. Synergy is when the sum of the parts is LESS than the whole. That means when you get individuals to work together as a team, you get more. Like if I tried to punch a board with an open hand of 5 individual fingers, I'd probably break a finger or two. But, if I put them all together in a fist, it's the board that will break. More power when you work together.

And there is power in people. Treat them like people, care about them, know them and enjoy them. Have fun with people. Everyone matters. If one horseshoe nail can determine the outcome of a battle, think of the difference one person can make—that person is you.

**Editor's Note:** The author asked his name appear as WEinberg to emphasize WE before i.

## About the Author



Colonel Dave WEinberg is currently the Chief of the Financial Analysis Division, Comptroller Directorate, Headquarters Air Education and Training Command, Randolph AFB, Texas. He is responsible for budgeting and executing the \$2.8 billion required to recruit, access, and train Air Force personnel. He received his commission as a distinguished graduate from the Clemson University ROTC program, where he served as the Cadet Group Commander in 1979. His comptroller assignments include nine years in finance, six years in budget, five years as a commander, and three years as a comptroller. Col WEinberg is a member of the American Society of Military Comptrollers (ASMC) and is the Alamo Chapter President.