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"Second Chance" Principles That Work for Business

Scott Silverman's agency, Second Chance, helps keep former inmates out of prison by emphasizing respect, integrity, and truth, and says these are the core for any business as well



Scott H. Silverman, executive director and founder of nonprofit agency Second Chance, is passionate about his vision to create results-driven programs that empower humanity. Second Chance is reducing the recidivism rate of people released from prison. Current statistics in California show a recidivism rate as high as 80% for ex-offenders. For those who complete Second Chance, the rate drops to 30%.

Silverman was recently honored as the CNN Hero of the Week. It was through that piece that I was first introduced to this down-to-earth hero and his extraordinary program. If Second Chance is an example of what Silverman's motto of "Tell Me No. I Dare You!" can do for California, it is time for the rest of the country to adopt the same motto.

Second Chance, based in San Diego, will be celebrating its 15th anniversary in September. When CNN named Scott its Hero of the Week, Anthony Panarella, a recent graduate of Second Chance, said: "Little kids have Superman or Spiderman. I have Scott Silverman." I was fascinated by his work, so I recently invited him to share the story and lessons of Second Chance. I believe his insights could be used in many arenas. Here are edited excerpts of a recent conversation.

MG: When I look at the pressing problems that California and the nation face, with 1 in 100 individuals incarcerated and a recidivism rate as high as 80% for those leaving prison, I am frankly amazed that you are having such good results. What do you believe is the most important item you deliver in your program?

SS: Attitude. We help people change their attitudes. My staff has a great attitude, I have a great attitude and we ask that our participants adopt a great attitude.

How do you define "great attitude"?

From the moment candidates for Second Chance walk through the door, they are treated as if they have enormous worth. This is an attitude of respect, and attitudes are contagious. Get with a group moaning about things, and soon you'll have a similar attitude. And the opposite is true, too. So I choose to spend as much time as possible with those who share my attitude that anything is possible. I believe that when people believe in their own worth, that attitude will begin to be reflected in everything they do.

Another item we focus on at Second Chance is the truth. There is the truth about me, the truth about you, and there is the truth. Your truth and my truth are subjective. The truth is what the facts are without the drama and projections. Once we are able to identify facts and even discuss our feelings about those facts, problems are able to be solved, and dignity is preserved.

The final item is integrity. What you do when you think no one is watching shows your true integrity. We challenge people to be in high integrity all the time.

It must be a great honor to be named a hero. We're living in a time when we need more heroes. What does it take to become a hero?

Good question. "Hero" is a title that others choose for you. I see myself as a guy that wants to teach people how to be the best they can be. Not a day goes by that I am not willing to do whatever it takes. It's not really a conscious decision. It's who I am.

How could the program you run for ex-offenders, the homeless, and the chronically unemployed be used in the business community? Could it help business?

Certainly! Replicating and expanding programs that reduce recidivism would increase the return on investment for the taxpayer from a fiscal perspective and for the community in a holistic way. There are some who believe if we just lock people away forever, it will be in our best interest. It's not.

What we teach at Second Chance can be taught in the business community: attitude, integrity, and respect for oneself and others. It all starts with people's attitude, and what they do when they think no one's watching. I hear a lot about the economy right now, and I agree it's more difficult to sell homes, pay bills, and raise funds, yet it is possible to control your attitude, maintain your integrity, and hold on to self-respect.

I tell people, if you do what you have always done and think the way you have always thought, you'll get what you always have gotten. But change your attitude and watch what happens. Attitude does not just happen. It can be taught. I believe we are currently in a time when those businesses that have a great attitude with their client base and create an atmosphere of integrity with their employees will be left standing when the economy eventually turns around. Those businesses with poor integrity and lackluster attitude will fold. If I have the choice to fly on two different airlines, and one has happy, helpful employees who respect me and those they work for, and the other has employees who mutter and sputter and [the company's] balance sheets are in the nightly news, I will choose the former, all the time.

What do you believe is the reason for your success? I know that during the first 10 years of running Second Chance, you took no federal or state money, yet you were successful and have grown from one man with a mission to an agency with 28 employees that service 7,000 people a year. You sound like a real entrepreneur.

Actually, Marshall, I am a social entrepreneur building human capital. It is our greatest wealth. I believe that the reason I am successful at building this capital is because I do not listen to No.

"Tell Me No. I Dare You!" truly is my motto (and the title of a book I'm writing). When some people hear No, they believe it means the game is over. When I hear No, I believe the game is just starting. That's my secret. It is also a secret that good businesses use.

In a time of economic downturn, what would you say to a young entrepreneur?

When everything seems to be going in one direction, the opportunity to go in the other direction becomes even bigger. In other words, the opportunity for growth can be the greatest at a time when it appears that there is no growth. I would say to an entrepreneur: There is always a way. Our brains are wired to find ways when it appears there is no way. If you look at history, it is during times of great trouble that great fortunes are made and greater heroism is created. So now is a good time to go into business, or whatever your heart is urging you to do.

Thank you! Keep up the good work. We need more people making a positive contribution to society, not more people in prison.

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Goldsmith's new book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, was recently listed as America's best-selling business book in *The Wall Street Journal*. He can be reached at Marshall@MarshallGoldsmith.com, and he provides his articles and videos online at MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com.