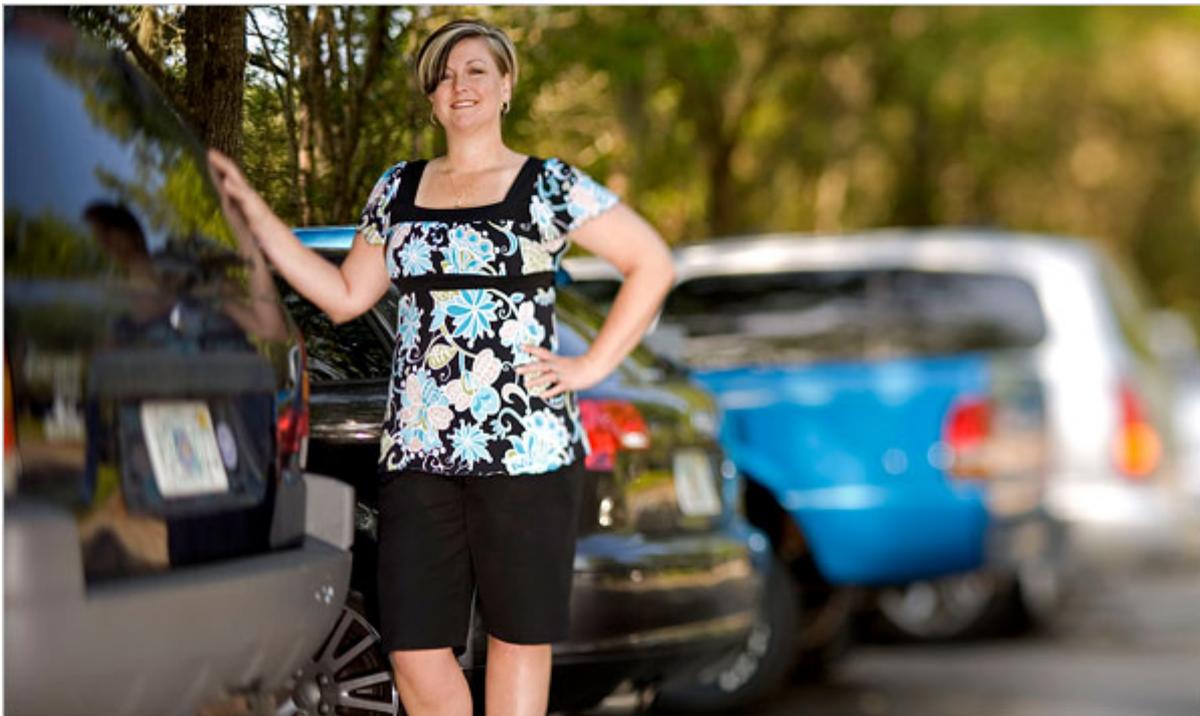


## Using the Human Touch to Solve Workplace Problems

Mickey Meece



Chris Livingston for The New York Times

Renee Richmond in the parking lot of her employer, Vurv, in Jacksonville, Fla. The company bought Richmond and another employee reliable used cars instead of hiring two new employees when the company moved to other side of Jacksonville.

A SMALL company in Jacksonville, Fla., came up with a novel — and sensitive — solution when two crucial employees had trouble making the commute to its new headquarters across town.

As Derek Mercer, the founder and chief executive of the company, Vurv Technology, tells it, the employees' supervisor came to him with the suggestion that the company buy two good used cars and give them to the workers outright.

Mr. Mercer said he agreed, and immediately approved the \$5,000 expenditure for each car.

Seven years later, the two employees, Tim Gunter and Renee Richmond, are still with Vurv, a developer of human resources software. The company itself has grown from about two dozen employees in those days to about 300 and is now in yet another building.

In looking at the alternative, Mr. Mercer said, it would have cost the company more than the nearly \$10,000 it paid for the automobiles to find and train replacements, not to mention the ground it would have lost with customers.

"I felt that they were good employees and responsive to the customers," Mr. Mercer said, and thus a valuable asset to the company.

Mr. Gunter, who helped clients with software issues, said he was barely six months on the job at Vurv when the family car broke down. He had to ask a neighbor for a ride to work that day, and he feared his new job was at risk.

That same day, Vurv bought him the used car.

"It wasn't the nicest car," he said. "It wasn't the prettiest car. It wasn't fresh off the lot with new-car smell. But boy, did my overwhelming feeling of dread go from that to enlightenment. This is what this company is about. This is what Derek is about."

At that point, Mr. Gunter said: "I was just hooked. The 80-hour weeks we worked after that never meant anything. It was give and take. I was giving and the company was definitely giving back."

Ms. Richmond, who helped companies deploy Vurv's software, was a single mother of two in 2000. Her Chevrolet Cavalier, with 270,000 miles on it, "finally took its last breath," she recalled. "I lived 45 miles away from the office, so I had quite a hike back and forth."

Her supervisor, who is no longer with the company, and Mr. Mercer knew of her troubles, she said, and at her annual evaluation offered to buy her a car instead of giving her a \$3,000 raise. They also helped her find the right car, a Diamanti, and paid \$4,500 for it, she said. She told them to work out an installment so she could pay the difference. They never did.

And then she got a second pleasant surprise: her raise started showing up in her paycheck as well.

"A company that takes care of their employees," Ms. Richmond said, "it definitely is returned to them tenfold because their employees are going to take care of them and do a good job."

Creativity and sensitivity meshed with good business sense at Vurv, and that is a crucial aspect of problem solving, according to Glenn Okun, clinical professor of management and entrepreneurship at the Stern School of Business at New York University. "Entrepreneurs must remember that resources have costs that must be borne by the firm," he said.

Small-business owners should approach such instances analytically, Professor Okun said, examining risk and opportunity. Act as if you are a third party interested in financing your own company, he suggested, and then decide how to proceed.

Especially now, when economic times are tough, Professor Okun said, business owners will have to weigh unexpected outlays against the knowledge there will be potentially less revenue coming in and less credit extended by lenders and investors to smooth rough patches. In this environment, he said, "problems get magnified, even if the firm is solid."

The solution at Vurv was a balancing act of trying to help employees while not hurting the bottom line.

The same was true for the Transtec Group in Austin, Tex., which helps public and private agencies in street, highway, airfield and seaport projects. Dan K. Rozycki, its president, recalled what happened when an employee had to get out of her apartment after a relationship broke up. "In a matter of days," Mr. Rozycki said, "we helped her find a new apartment and we furnished the whole place from sofa to spatula."

The company has done so many things for employees, he said, that "it's hard to remember stuff we've done over the years."

"When you're small and flexible and put co-workers first," he said, "stuff just happens, but nobody records it or thinks it's that shocking."

When another employee had serious personal problems, he said, the company offered and paid for the professional therapy.

And when a new employee from China needed to learn how to drive, colleagues took him for driving lessons and helped him shop for a car.

In addition, he said, over the years, the company has learned how to avoid common pitfalls that could fester as problems. Asking for raises is often tricky for employees and employers, Mr. Rozycki said, "so we give out raises every Jan. 1 to everyone." No one has complained in the last seven years, he said.

As to industry conferences, he said, the company decided to invite every one rather than select a few so that no one felt left out.

“What it really comes down to,” he said, “is we’re trying to create the ultimate workplace. We believe you can do the right thing and be profitable.”

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