

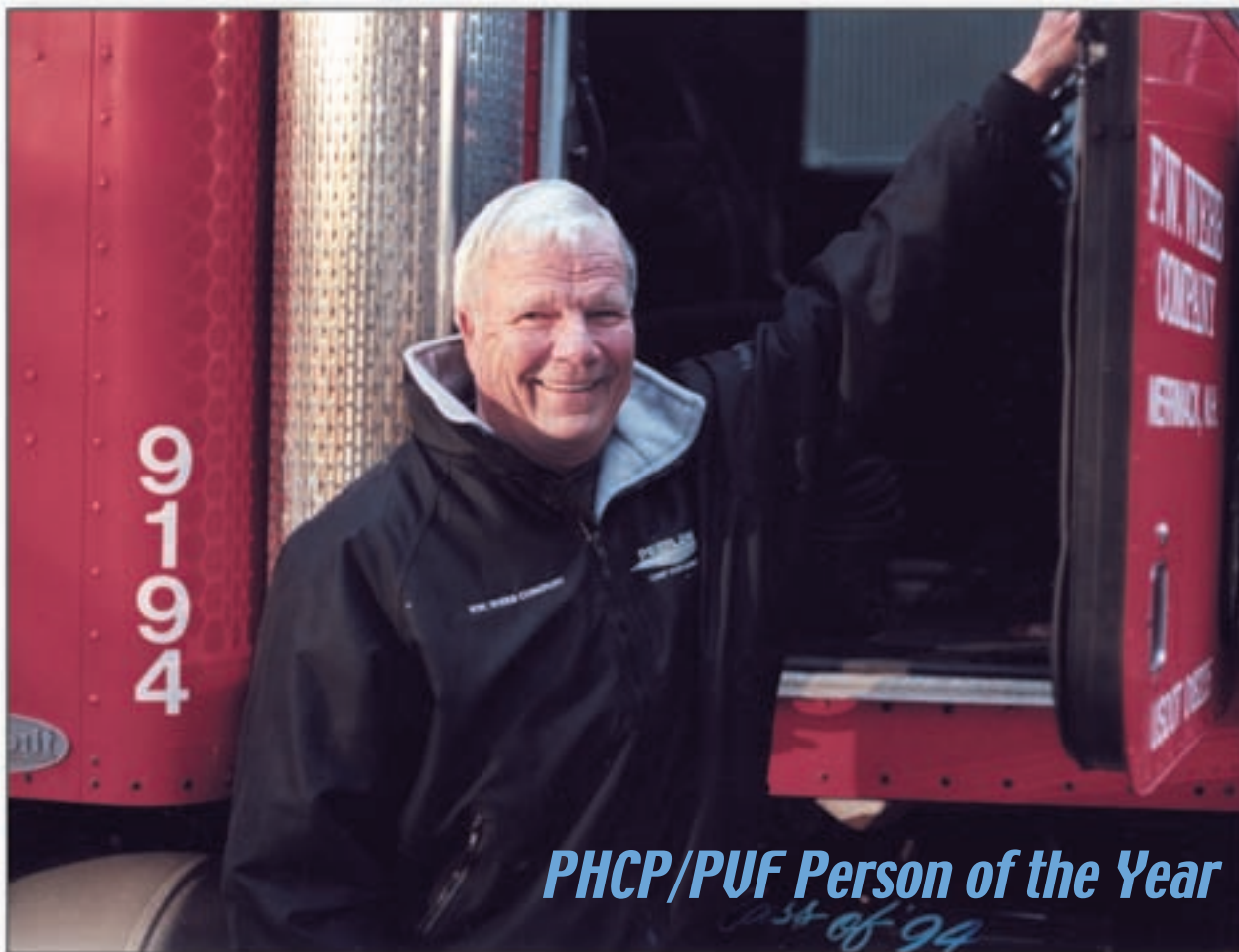


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DECEMBER 2011
 VOL. 66, NO. 12

THE WHOLESALER

News of Plumbing • Heating • Cooling • Industrial Piping Distribution



Ferguson buys major Calif. waterworks distributor

NEWPORT NEWS, VA. —Ferguson Enterprises Inc. announces the acquisition of Groeniger & Company in an asset transaction completed November 7. At the present time, the company will continue to operate under its existing name and be led by Groeniger's current executive vice president, Dick Alexander.

(Turn to 'Flagship'... page 53.)

Contractors Pipe & Supply buys assets of A&S Supply

FARMINGTON HILLS, MICH. — Contractors Pipe & Supply Corp. has purchased the assets of plumbing and heating distributor A&S Supply, which is based in Flint, Mich., and has been doing business in Flint and the surrounding area for 62 years. Until the recession took its toll, they were a dominant player in the marketplace.

(Turn to Flint-based... page 53.)

John Pope, CEO of F.W. Webb Company, has spent 55 years building a dynamic wholesaling business while enriching the lives of all those around him. Pope has consistently grown what he affectionately refers to as 'Frank's company' through innovation and diversification — and the confidence he's built among his extremely loyal team with a philosophy of 'Let the players play.' Story begins on page 32.

'Technology is linchpin'

Epicor hosts panel on future of wholesaling



YARDLEY, PA. — An audience representing 60+ wholesale distribution companies was treated to an unprecedented gathering of industry thought leaders as they recently discussed enterprise resource planning

(ERP) and the technology-enabled distributor of the future. The expert panel at the annual Distribution Executive Forum hosted by Epicor Software Corporation, a global leader in business software solutions for manufacturing, distribution, retail and services organizations, included:

- Kevin Roach, executive vice president and general manager, ERP Americas for Epicor

- Guy Blissett, researcher at IBM and fellow of the NAW Institute for Distribution Excellence

- Tom Gale, president, Gale Media/Industrial Market Information, and publisher of *Modern Distribution Management*

- Dr. Barry Lawrence, director of Texas A&M's Industrial Distribution Program

- Mike Marks, managing partner of Indian River Consulting Group

(Turn to Forum... page 53.)



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32 • PHCP/PVF Person of the Year

The caretaker

John Pope reflects on illustrious career building F.W. Webb

BY MARY JO MARTIN
Editorial director

“Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there.”
— John Wooden

When I joined this great industry in 1994, one of the most important lessons I learned was that it is not defined by the products within it — but rather by the legacy of individuals who have tirelessly given of themselves to enrich their companies, their trading partners and the industry as a whole.



“This business is all about relationships... You’re only as good as the last order you got, so you want to make sure that you’ve got the best people taking care of your customers, and that they care.”

It’s been such a privilege for me to meet and learn about many of these individuals over the years. These legends — many of whom are part of what Tom Brokaw has termed “The Greatest Generation” — really are a special breed. They laid the course for their own businesses and paved the way for all those who followed.

The Wholesaler wanted a way to honor these outstanding individuals, and so we present our inaugural PHCP/PVF Person of the Year to F.W. Webb CEO John Pope. It was my absolute delight to visit the company’s headquarters in Bedford, Mass., this fall to interview Mr. Pope, his son Jeff, who serves as F.W. Webb president, and key executives Ernie Coutermarsh and John Provencal.

Mr. Pope epitomizes the John Wooden quote I used above. He is an exceptionally smart man who just five years after joining the business had to learn on his feet following the sudden death of his father. In his 55-year career, Pope has shown incredible foresight in building a dynamic, highly successful wholesaling business that covers much of the Northeast. At the same time, it is his character that is what others largely



F.W. Webb is headquartered in this beautiful building in Bedford, Mass. The highly diversified company has about 1,400 employees across its 75 locations in the Northeast and sells into 11 market segments.

use to define him.

A former Naval officer, Pope certainly exemplifies the pledge they make to be “An Officer and a Gentleman.” Throughout his years at the helm of F.W. Webb, Pope has built an extremely loyal workforce and customer and vendor base. He has also given countless hours of volunteer leadership to industry associations, as well as supporting numerous charities and organizations in the Northeast.

Following are excerpts from our conversation.

MJM: Did you grow up working in the business?

John Pope: I had worked at the Salem location during the summers while I was in school, and then after I got out of the Navy, I worked at the Roxbury store. The Navy taught me a lot and was a great experience. I was on active duty for two years and then in the reserves. As a 23-year-old, I was in charge of 90 men. It was a challenge, but I had a great chief. We made a deal. I said, “You take care of these guys and I’ll take care of you.”

I liked the way my father lived and enjoyed working in the business for him when I was in school, so when I got out of the Navy, I figured ‘Why not?’ Something interesting is that former Boston Celtic great Bill Rus-

sell worked for a Ford dealership next door as salesman. Back in those days, professional athletes didn’t make anywhere near the money they do now, and many took off season jobs



F.W. Webb CEO John Pope

to make ends meet.

MJM: I love the quote from your father, Roger Pope: “Management’s responsibility to employees is to give them the opportunity to make money and to show them how to have fun doing it.” He sounds like such a genuine man. What memories would you share with me about your dad?

John Pope: Dad graduated from
(Turn to At F.W.... page 34.)



John Pope (at head of table) has built a dedicated team at F.W. Webb, including (from left) Ernie Coutermarsh, John Provencal and Jeff Pope. His ability to listen and ‘let the players play’ has inspired great loyalty throughout the organization.

34. PHCP/PVF Person of the Year

At F.W. Webb, John Pope trusts his people to build the company

(Continued from page 32.)

college. He was the son of a master plumber, and became a master plumber himself. He was really a bright guy who could spell about any



Jeff Pope, F.W. Webb president

word you ever wanted him to. He was somewhat stern, but he was a risk taker. To buy a company in Roxbury in 1933 was a huge risk.

He was a wonderful man to know. Every Tuesday night, I'd go up and have dinner at the big house and he'd sit and talk about the company. He was pulling information out of me and not giving much. He was trying

to find out what I knew.

Dad was right. I don't know how you can have more fun than making things happen. You've got to keep trying new things to find out what will work. You should have fun at what you do. When the company was a lot smaller, we had a lot of bonding opportunities. We'd all go count inventory together at our locations. And we used to have managers' weekends each year, going to a resort and just having fun together. As we've grown so much, and we have a lot more people, these things are harder to do.

MJM: What was it like for you at such a young age to take over the reins after his sudden death?

John Pope: It was hard. Several of my father's compatriots looked at me as a 29-year-old who didn't know anything, and thought they didn't need to answer to me. I had a lot to learn.

I did learn that you've got to lose before you win. If you don't, you probably don't know how to win or why. The company wasn't growing. We had the same basic sales numbers for about five years. You can't make money doing that.

So I started turning to others for ad-



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Just part of F.W. Webb's impressive fleet of trucks, although, says John Pope, 'What creates the Webb company are the people.'

vice, we made some acquisitions and away we went. I learned how to listen and, much like the philosophy in the Navy, how to "Let the players play." Sometimes, you've got to get the hell out of the way. You've got to have trust in your people because if you don't, you can't grow.

MJM: It sounds as though you also learned a lot from your father's best friend Jack Douglas of Douglas Pottery in Cincinnati.

John Pope: Prior to my father's sudden death, I had only been with the company a few years, working as an inventory clerk and outside salesman. I didn't have a clue how to run the business. I'd sit there at night alone in the building trying to decide what to do. I wanted to do things the same as my father, but I had a lot to learn.

I was fortunate to be able to lean on "Uncle Jack," as I called him. He was very bright and I learned a great deal from him. One of the most important things he taught me was that if someone asks you a question, say "Why do you ask?" Try to find out why people are asking a question; it will help teach you what they are looking for.

MJM: Give us an overview of F.W. Webb today?

John Pope: We've got about 75 locations currently, including 25 major ones and 27 showrooms, and more than 1,400 employees. Our territory runs from Maine down to Connecticut and from the coast as far south as Newburgh, N.Y.

We made a conscious effort to keep buying inventory. I think we've captured a bigger market share because we do have inventory available. But we still have many good competitors and as long as one of their trucks is going down the street, it's an order we don't have. I always ask "Why?" We don't have all the business; we never will. But we can try like hell.

This business is all about relationships. Selling can be hard sometimes;

sometimes you're your own worst enemy. You're only as good as the last order you got, so you want to make sure that you've got the best people taking care of your customers, and that they care.

Our employees stay with us a long time; most have been here at least 15 years and have maxed out on their vacation time. We also have



In 2006 F.W. Webb became an official sponsor of the Boston Red Sox and got its logo on the Green Monster at Fenway Park.

some multi-generation family members here.

We have a profit sharing plan for employees that helped build that loyalty. We take 25% of all we make before tax and give it back to the employees. It allows them to share in the money we make, and it's a great incentive for them.

MJM: You have worked very hard to diversify F.W. Webb. What are some of the key areas of business you're in?

John Pope: We are in 11 markets all together. That has enabled our company to continue to grow and expand, because when some markets are down, others are up.

There are four primary legs to our stool — plumbing, hydronic heating, industrial PVF and HVAC. Then we have smaller parts like refrigeration, pumps, bio-pharm, fire protection, LP gas, and water systems.

I don't think that you can survive today with only plumbing and hydronic heating. But, you've got to (Turn to Third-generation..page 36.)

Reflections from Ernie Coutermarsh

Senior vice president-industrial business development Ernie Coutermarsh has been with F.W. Webb for more than 40 years — and has a goal of reaching 50 years with the company. He holds great affection and respect for John Pope, and graciously shared some of his reflections with me.

"I came out of Marine Corps, which taught me teamwork, history and tradition. When I first met with John one of the things that struck me was that F.W. Webb embodied those same characteristics. When you get to know John, you can see the pride, which is the fuel that has helped the company evolve. He challenged all of us to grow and shared his vision of the future. He created an expectation that stretched you and made you think of yourself in a different way; not as an employee, but more like an owner. It makes you want to please him, and it also helps you develop a healthy self-respect. He took a lot of ordinary folks and put us in the right spots. He encouraged us to take chances, with the attitude of 'You've got to buy a ticket to



go on the ride.'

"We don't fear anybody, but we have a healthy respect for the other competitors out there of all sizes. We know that at the core it is our customers making decisions every day, and there are plenty of other choices for our customers today. We have been conditioned to provide an extraordinary level of service.

"John has a great gift of really listening to people. He used to carry a little leather notebook and when he'd pull it out, it meant he was taking notes. He would want to know the good and the bad, why we made certain decisions and if the ball is moving forward or how we plan on fixing a problem.

"He surrounded us with all the tools we needed and a humble attitude. He has always been personally involved and worked hard. He talks about the nuts and bolts of distribution, customers, service and what it really means, trends and how they will affect us. He also taught us about being loyal and respectful to our vendors, and growing the business together." ■

36. PHCP/PVF Person of the Year

Third-generation family business F.W. Webb looks to 4th generation

(Continued from page 34.)

build your niche businesses to be big enough so they're meaningful.

We made some key acquisitions like Shepard Corporation, Kennebec Supply, and Victor, to get us into the LP business; ECS, which gave us entry into the HVACR business; and INSCO that got us into valve controls.

When it comes to acquisitions, the most important thing is the sharing of information. When you cast your bread on the water, it doesn't always have to come back soggy.

Being diversified has really helped us when the economy struggles. We've consistently looked at what other ponds we could be a big fish in. It's always going to be what else makes sense for us to get into and how are we going to grow our busi-

ness. There are still opportunities in this territory to grow.

MJM: *You have an impressive Central Distribution facility. How has it helped your business?*

John Pope: If we hadn't done it, I think we'd be out of business because it has cut out so much inventory redundancy.

The CD came about because I was driving down to Quincy one day and saw a big building with a sign for Jordan Marsh on the side. I knew they didn't have a store there and I started investigating. I learned about the concept of centralized distribution and thought it could work well in our business. We built it around 1970.

It has also been instrumental in growing our CD Sales master distribution business. After we built our

A long, distinguished history

F.W. Webb's roots go back to 1866 when two men – Stultz and Mansur – formed a small brass shop in Boston. In 1888 they sold their shop to Henry McShane of Baltimore, owner of The McShane Company, which was famous for its church bells and its large brass foundry. McShane named his brother-in-law Frank W. Webb as the general manager of the Boston distribution facility. In 1900, Webb purchased the Boston facility and changed the name of the company to The F.W. Webb Manufacturing Company. The company manufactured brass fittings, faucets and accessories, and also offered china and enameled iron plumbing fixtures — much of which were made by Trenton pottery under the F.W. Webb label.

Webb died in 1912, and its growth was limited in the ensuing years. The Pope family and others purchased the company in 1933, when sales were less than \$350,000.

By 1945, Roger Pope began to expand F.W. Webb with new locations in Fitchburg, Greenfield, Hyannis, Pittsfield and Salem, Mass., as well as their first location across state lines in Nashua, N.H. John Pope joined the company in 1956. When Roger Pope passed away in 1962, the company had seven locations and sales in excess of \$5 million.

In the 1970s, F.W. Webb made a series of key acquisitions, including Atlantic Pipe in Boston; Crane Supply with locations in Portland, Maine and Springfield, Mass.; Shepard Supply with locations in Barre, Rutland and St. Johnsbury, Vt. During the time, the company also opened start-up locations in Williston, Vt., Lebanon and Dover, N.H., and Bangor, Maine. In 1978 F.W.

Webb built a 60,000-square-foot Central Distribution facility in Merrimack, N.H.

Jeff Pope joined the company in 1980 and by the end of that decade, F.W. Webb opened locations in Albany, Plattsburgh and Queensbury, N.Y. In the 1990s, the company opened



Painted by Jenny Pope, this canvas depicts F.W. Webb Manufacturing Co. in Boston when Frank W. Webb (pictured in center window) purchased it in 1900.

branches in Syracuse, N.Y. and Hartford, Conn., along with making acquisitions of Energy Control Systems in Woburn, Mass., International Supply in Lincoln, R.I., Kentrol Inc. and Sevo Inc.; the W.L. Blake Co. in Portland, Maine; and Victor Mfg.

In more recent years, F.W. Webb created the Webb BioPharm division to service pharmaceutical and bio-tech markets throughout New England and New York, and acquired Utilities Supply, a major player in the plastic PVF business. The company's annual sales now exceed \$700 million. ■



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A history buff, John Pope has quite a collection of company memorabilia on display throughout the F.W. Webb headquarters. Here, with just a sample of the displays in Pope's office are (from left) John Pope, Ernie Coutermarsh, Jeff Pope and John Provencal.

CD, we wondered what else we could do with it, and we started thinking about how to sell to our competitors because they've got an order we don't and we wanted a way to get a piece of it. We ship product all over the world. We are very reliable and make it easy for wholesalers who need to get a product quickly.

MJM: *A lot of companies give lip service to the term "customer service" but you seem to really live it. How have you managed to instill that throughout your company?*

Jeff Pope: Managing is like writing in the snow while it's still snowing. You've got to keep going over and over and over it. Does everybody understand? Maybe not at first. Will they? Eventually. Why? We have Profit Sharing that has been a great incentive to service the customer. But, it's always a work in progress.

We have a slogan that says "Every Customer Counts." And we mean both our external and internal customers. We transfer a lot of products between branches. We have to continue to impress upon our people how important it is to get the material — correct and on time — from one store to another. It has to be perfect. Working as a team when you have over 1,400 people and 70-plus locations is one of our biggest challenges.

MJM: *Jeff, what are some of the key things you've learned from the way your father has managed this business?*

Jeff Pope: First thing is listening to our people — especially those who

are out there with our customers or with our products, like the truck drivers and the warehouse and counter personnel. Try to make them feel comfortable enough to talk to you openly and not criticize them just because they might tell you something you don't want to hear.

You also have to prepare them to

"Sometimes you've got to get the hell out of the way. You've got to have trust in your people because if you don't, you can't grow."

make tough decisions. You have to have faith in your people and let them do their jobs. Everyone will make mistakes but that's how we all learn. We want them to have the confidence to try. Hunkering down has never been our style.

We're defying the odds right now as a third-generation family owned company. I want to make sure it gets to the next generation. My dad has always taught me that our role is as the caretakers of this business.

MJM: *Jeff, talk about what it's been like growing up in this business and now serving as president of F.W. Webb?*

Jeff Pope: There's a lot of pressure in being my dad's son, but I was exposed to the business from a young age and was fortunate to have someone like [former president] Jack Hester to report to and he taught me so much. I've also got a great team that surrounds me.

I've been just about everything — working at the counter, warehouse, inside sales, outside sales, store manager and general manager. Being a store manager was very valuable experience. (Turn to John Pope... page 38.)

38. PHCP/PUF Person of the Year

John Pope views self as caretaker of F.W. Webb's 145-year traditions

(Continued from page 36.)

perience for me. It was a small branch and you had to do everything; plus you got to meet customers up close, and had to take care of everything and anything that came at you.

Since 2002, I've been the president and I really enjoy it. I like setting a course of what I want to see happen and then determining what we need to do to make sure that it happens. It's going to be fun building the team of our future. I occasionally think about what the next F.W. Webb is going to look like.

MJM: Mr. Pope, I've been told that you never refer to F.W. Webb as "my company" but rather "Frank's company." Why is that?

John Pope: What creates the Webb company are the people. You cannot make a cult figure out of one person. Sometimes people try to make you into something you don't want to be. If you refer to something as a third party, you can do a lot of things. I inherited my job; I didn't climb over a lot of people's backs to get here. You've got to get the ego out of the way.

MJM: Based on your long experience, are there any words of wisdom you could share with today's younger generation?

John Pope: You have to look at things the way you think other people are looking at them. If you listen hard enough and let the players play, good things will happen. People can tell you all the important information you need to know if you provide an open environment of communication. The good ones will leave if you don't listen to them and let them grow; then you'll be stuck with the average or worse employees. You've got to make business fun and challenging to inspire the best people.

One of my favorite sayings is from Guiseppe Mazzini, who was an Italian revolutionary: "Sleep not in the tents of your fathers. The world is advancing. Advance with it."

People that adapt are successful. You must adapt to your environment or you will perish. And it's important to remember, you only get to drive the bus for a while and then it's someone else's turn. ■

How times change

To give you a perspective on Mr. Pope's length of service, here are some interesting facts from 1956 — the year he joined F.W. Webb:

- A new car cost around \$2,050
- Norma Jean Mortenson changed her name to Marilyn Monroe
- A gallon of gas was 22 cents
- A loaf of bread cost 18 cents
- Dwight Eisenhower was President and Richard Nixon was Vice President
- Cost of a first class postage stamp was 3 cents
- Minimum wage in the United States was \$1.00 per hour
- "Around the World in 80 Days" won Best Motion Picture at the Academy Awards
- Elvis Presley released "Hound Dog" and "Heartbreak Hotel"
- Johnny Cash's "I Walk the Line" became a hit ■



Sports have been a big part of Webb's marketing efforts, from sponsoring the Boston Red Sox to NASCAR racing events.



Editorial director Mary Jo Martin was delighted to spend a day at the F.W. Webb headquarters in Bedford, Mass., to conduct interviews for this article. Here, she prepares to shoot a short video with F.W. Webb president Jeff Pope. Visit the 'On the Road' section of www.thewholesaler.com to view the videos Mary Jo recorded with key members of the F.W. Webb team.

"People that adapt are successful. You must adapt to your environment or you will perish. And it's important to remember, you only get to drive the bus for a while, and then it's someone else's turn."

Thoughts from John Provencal

Senior vice president-sales John Provencal is another of F.W. Webb's long-time employees, with 31 years of service. He, too, wanted to share his thoughts on the legacy that John Pope has built at F.W. Webb.

"He never wanted to be in the spotlight, but his position put him there. He's stayed consistent in his style and management through the years. He believes that the success of the company was his people, and even refers to employees as stakeholders. You run into a lot of people in business who refer to employees as 'my people' or 'my team.' But with John, it's always been 'we' or 'Frank's company.' He's a pretty remarkable



guy. You don't find many people like him.

"He's always reinvested in the company and the people, and created an entrepreneurial spirit within the company. Longevity here is infectious. You go to our branches and it's almost like there is a whole bunch of owners. It is great to hear them talk about the company as a team. The attitude comes down from the top, because when John doesn't use his position, it sets an example for all of us. He's taught us humility and a sense of fair play. We all have different titles and positions but at end of the day we all work for our family here and that family works for us.

"While John represents the past, he's kept himself current by working hard with the new technology tools to make sure he's still in touch and relevant. He has a vision and a passion for the future with the business that will help him and the company grow. One of the things that has remained constant is that he's never forgotten the customer. Everything we do revolves around the customer. John has an incredible ability to communicate with all of our customers. No matter what the situation, he relates and understands.

"I think his legacy will always be that he generated a tremendous amount of loyalty, respect, appreciation and commitment by the people who worked in the organization. They idolize him because of the way he treats them and cares about them. He's brought the best out of some very good people and made them better." ■