

Soft Skills at Work: A genuine smile can go a long way

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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Every two weeks, I go to Costco at Arundel Mills. It is one of my favorite stores and I always hope that Charlose Parker will be there greeting customers.

I met Charlose eight years ago when the store first opened. As I approached him, he was laughing with other Costco members, and I remember thinking Charlose had one of the biggest, most welcoming smiles I'd ever seen. It was so genuine that I felt like a dear friend.

Without exception, Charlose greets me with a heartfelt hello every time I see him. I wondered how he brings that exceptional positive attitude to the job every day and so I asked him to talk about this important attribute in the workplace.

He has different positions at the store, primarily as a stocker and door person.

The first thing Charlose told me was that he loves his job.

"When people come in, I like talking to them and seeing how they feel," he said. "I love being around people and listening."

Charlose spoke about learning to be positive as he grew up, but he credits his work environment with providing support and encouraging him to take on challenges.

"I like working with the people at Costco," he said. "I have good bosses. They are about their work. I try to do what I can to satisfy them and try my best to not miss any day."

In fact, Charlose has only missed a few days in eight years. Lewis Bellafore, warehouse manager at Costco #325, had nothing but complimentary comments about Charlose's attitude.

"It's everything about him," Lewis said. "His energy and he's not fake. There is not a negative bone in his body. He enjoys his work and there's not one aspect he doesn't like. It radiates from him. It's awesome."

Lewis believes a positive attitude is most important when interacting with Costco members.

"Being positive is the formula to great customer service," he said. "If you project being happy, people want to be part of it."

Lewis meets with staff to specifically focus on member service. He described what he calls "moments of truths" that occur when communicating with customers.

"Members may need help or are having their own problems," Lewis tells his employees. "They are not upset with us. Pay attention to every moment of truth. That's what makes the difference."

This emphasis on being positive is what sets Costco apart, according to Lewis. Charlose has obviously learned this very well. He talked about how he relates to members.

"One of the mottos here is to be friendly," he said. "We want to make customers feel good when they come in and leave."

Charlose told me about older gentlemen who like to talk with him about retirement, and kids who give him a hug. He adds special touches when he sees a "moment of truth."

"If they will tell me they're not feeling well, I ask if they need anything, like water," Charlose said. "If someone is frowning, I say, next time you come in you owe me a smile! Then they smile the next time."

When Charlose and I ended our conversation, he said, "Hey, you enjoy your day," flashing a big grin.

Then as he was walking toward the exit, Charlose asked customers with genuine affection, "Hey, how you all doing?" and he waved to other members across the store.

It was great fun to watch Charlose interact with people in the store. There is no question he has a real gift and he embodies one of the best examples of a positive attitude I've ever seen.

CONNECT! Coalition

CONNECT! members have been attending Business Advisory Board meetings at county high schools to bring awareness to the coalition's mission and activities. In the past few months, educators and businesspeople at Northeast and North County high schools have learned about the purpose of CONNECT! and been invited to become involved.

Groups interested in a presentation can contact Sue Gallagher with the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corp. at sgallagher@aawdc.org. CONNECT! is now a project of the development group.

If your school, business, or organization is focusing on soft skills and their importance, send me an e-mail describing the activity or program. Consider becoming involved in the coalition to help us spread the word.

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