

Bill Schultz And The Meaning Of Leadership

The Fender brand and product line enjoy such strength and position around the globe today that it's difficult to recall just how troubled the company was back in 1984. Quality was dismal, a lack of R&D had left gaping holes in the product line, and the organization was demoralized. Things were so bad that when CBS put the division up for sale, there were virtually no takers. The conventional wisdom was that Fender, despite its illustrious role as the pioneer of the electric guitar, was destined for the scrap heap. Credit for this remarkable turnaround goes principally to William "Bill" Schultz, who died last month at the age of 80. [A tribute to Schultz appeared in the October issue of *The Music Trades*.]

Leadership is one of those overused terms that have been the subject of countless essays and self-help business books. Employees at Fender probably never needed any of these texts because in Bill Schultz they had first-hand access to the walking, talking embodiment of inspired leadership. After leading a leveraged buyout of Fender, Bill didn't salvage the guitar maker single-handedly, as he would be the first to admit. But ask anyone at the company, and they will tell you that he was the catalyst that pulled together and motivated the talent to get the job done.

Trying to describe exactly how Bill managed this trick is a bit like trying to use words to convey a sublime musical performance. He had all the textbook attributes of a good leader: He had humility; he was unflinchingly honest; his integrity was beyond question; he set high standards; he was loyal to a fault; he never asked more than he was willing to give; and, above all, he genuinely wanted personal success for everyone who worked for him. But there was more to him than just a laundry list of good habits: He had this unique spark in his personality that lit a fire in anyone who came into his orbit and prompted them to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

The amazing power of this spark was on display at an October 15 memorial celebration, where hundreds of Fender employees, customers, and even a few competitors, joined with the Schultz family to honor Bill's memory. Each heartfelt tribute and story shed light on a dif-



ferent facet of Bill's personality, but all carried the same simple message: "Through word and deed Bill inspired me to be a better human being."

One of the directives Bill relentlessly drilled into the Fender management team was that they had an almost sacred responsibility to excel because the livelihood of thousands of factory workers around the world was at stake. As one vice-president recalled, "Bill used to say, 'If you screw up, someone at a Fender plant in California or Mexico could lose their job, their house, and suffer. Don't ever forget that.'"

Perhaps the best summation of this concern for others can be found in the words of Khalil Gibran, who said: "Work is love made visible." Despite a gruff exterior and a brusque manner, Bill's efforts in life were motivated by a genuine love for his co-workers, a love of music, and a love of his customers around the world.

Bill's life and career provide testimony to the power of a single individual to drive change. In 1984 it was not inevitable by any stretch of the imagination that Fender would emerge as the world's best-selling guitar or that the organization would provide employment for nearly 2,600. Fender could have just as well become another listing in one of the many guitar encyclopedias, sandwiched in between departed brands like "Favilla" and "Gurian." At that inflection point in history, Bill Schultz was the one who stepped in and made the difference. Although not everyone can hope to achieve on the same scale, his life provides a useful lesson to us all: The outcome of events is not preordained, and by dint of energy and effort we all have power to improve the world around us and our lot as well.

Brian T. Majeski

Editor

Email: brian@musictrades.com