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## 'Seeing the good' pays dividends

By Charlie Mathews

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MANITOWOC — Kenlyn Gretz's collection agency, Americollect, has grown from 12 to 54 employees in less than five years.

At a Thursday morning seminar sponsored by ABR Employment Services, Gretz said dumb luck, marketing, technology and market conditions help explain some of the growth of the local business.

"But the real question is why do we continue to grow," said Gretz, whose company has broken ground on an 8,400-square-foot building in the city of Manitowoc's west side I-Tech Park.

While qualified and highly skilled employees are necessary, Gretz said the one thing that can help an organization through growth, as well as down times, is a positive culture.

Gretz's talk was titled "How to Create Positive Culture with People — the True Assets of a Business" and the 30 in attendance at the downtown American Red Cross office were from a variety of public and private sectors.

"No matter what your business is, a positive culture is attainable and it is built over time," Gretz said. He said an example showing Americollect is succeeding at fostering a positive culture employees share with friends is the fact it had 87 applicants for the four positions they filled earlier this month.

Positive culture includes having change come from within with leadership wanting to change. "You need to make small continuous changes within your organization," Gretz said. "Too large of changes all at once and you will have chaos and a decrease in customer satisfaction and production."

He advocates surveying employees about what they think it is like working for the organization, "and be sure to ask everybody. You need to find out what the frontline people are thinking, not just the managers," said the Two Creeks native who bought the company in 1999, after 11 years with the firm.

### **Employee driven change**

A crucial strategy is to develop a culture with employee driven leadership, asking for employee input before leadership implements changes, so the employee is more willing to follow the changes.

Gretz said a variety of opportunities for ownership to listen and communicate proposed changes should be developed including monthly meetings, informal lunchtime discussions, and use of an intranet can be valuable.

But employees should not be under the delusion every suggestion they make will be implemented.

Another focus of Gretz's remarks was "Hire-Move-Fire the Right People."

"People are too valuable to just fire," Gretz said. "Firing good people causes other good people to wonder about loyalty."

Some employees have strong technical skills but are not good team players. Other workers may be valuable as non-supervisory personnel but shouldn't be managers.

Gretz suggested using a coaching matrix to assess employees, and urged managers to have employees perform frequent self-evaluations.

"After they complete their lists of strengths and weaknesses we go over them with the employees," Gretz said. "We focus on the positive and we jointly choose one weakness to improve on. We pick an easy one and develop an improvement action plan."

Gretz said everybody needs feedback, and "we now have started to ask new hires, in advance, how they would like to be given feedback." Some might prefer face-to-face communication, while others are more comfortable with e-mail.

Ultimately, in creating a positive culture, the focus is on seeing good. "When you find yourself looking for good in people, then they will produce good," he said.

"Others who see that you acknowledge the good in people will then work on being good so that they get acknowledged," Gretz said.

*Charlie Mathews: 920-686-2969, or [cmathews@htrnews.com](mailto:cmathews@htrnews.com)*