



The Inclusive Leader: Ronald D. Casbon

By John Kerr

John Kerr is a special projects editor for *Supply Chain Management Review*

Most other senior managers would have thought they had the team they needed. After all, sourcing personal protective equipment for the factory was a relatively straightforward job. But Ron Casbon didn't think that way.

Casbon insisted that his cross-functional team at Bethlehem Steel—well-staffed with managers with great credentials in safety protocols and deep knowledge of safety gear—needed to get the opinions of the people who were going to have to wear the equipment on the shop floor. The insights from the factory workers proved invaluable—and surprised many on the sourcing team. “There's nothing like practical knowledge,” says Casbon.

During the early 1990s, Casbon brought his inclusive perspective to bear as an officer of the Lehigh Valley chapter of what was then the National Association of Purchasing Management (NAPM). Attendance at chapter meetings generally did not top 25—a lackluster turnout since the chapter had more than 10 times that many members. Casbon led a drive to survey what members wanted to hear and learn—and then helped organize meetings around their declared interests. Three years later, meeting attendance had tripled, hitting numbers that were twice the NAPM's mean levels nationwide.

Ronald D. Casbon was, in fact, an inclusive leader long before it became fashionable to be so. In his earliest purchasing job in the 1980s, as a dis-

trict purchasing agent for Bethlehem Steel's Shape and Rail Products division, he encountered the management culture that was typical of the times, where employees were expected to follow management's rules without deviation. “In those days I often paid a price for challenging processes and procedures,” he recalls.

Asked to define leadership, he is quick to respond: “It's the ability and commitment to enable others to perform at higher levels by sharing knowledge and experience.” He believes that the path to stronger leadership skills among supply chain management

professionals must include more team-based cross-functional opportunities as well as plenty of strong mentoring and experience-sharing programs.

Over several decades in increasingly senior procurement roles, Ron Casbon has seen the prevailing management culture shift to recognize the value of employee involvement and to promote empowerment at all levels. “Without question, people are being encouraged to bring forth their ideas,” he says. “It is happening more often than not.”

But he still sees worrying gaps between what many supply chain executives say and

what they practice. The issue he is most concerned about is the tendency for managers to play it too safe. High on the list of the leadership qualities he has always sought in his managers is “willingness to challenge the process”—meaning that he has always pushed himself and those who report to him to take prudent risks in the quest for results.



Involvement and empowerment are core tenets of Ron Casbon's leadership philosophy.

Five Rules to Lead By

Some time after he had first taken flak for challenging “the system” as a young manager at Bethlehem Steel, Casbon came across *The Leadership Challenge*, a book by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. “The five basic principles of this book really summarize the leadership style that I embrace and try to follow,” he says. He lists them:

1. Model the way: Take prudent risks, eliminate barriers and provide full support.

2. Inspire a shared vision: Identify what is possible in spite of barriers.

3. Challenge the process: Ask what can we do better.

4. Enable others to act: Enlist and empower people—and give them freedom to fail.

5. Encourage the heart: Celebrate and reward accomplishments with personal memos, recognition events such as lunches, dinners, gift cards—both individual and team awards.

Casbon sees plenty of managers stepping up to those principles. But his issue is with those who don’t step up to them often enough, uniformly enough, or consistently enough. “There is still some work to do to enable employees to challenge processes and accept failure when things don’t go right,” he says.

A big advocate of the book’s first principle, Casbon also thinks many supply chain managers would do well to lead by example in terms of taking prudent risks. “What I see are people doing it once or twice,” he says. The higher that managers rise in the ranks, the less inclined they are to push the envelope as much as they could.

Casbon comes by his frank opinions honestly. Since 2008 he has been a senior consultant with Greybeard Advisors LLC, an advisory firm in procurement transformation, strategic sourcing, and supply chain management. In his consultancy role, Casbon has had ample opportunity to observe the behavior of supply chain managers up close. His years at

Bethlehem Steel and later at chemicals producer Bayer also exposed him to many different styles of leadership.

The management practices he remembers most vividly were those of Jim Kegg, the manager who hired him for his first real “career job” as a purchasing agent at Bethlehem Steel. Kegg, who would go on to become a corporate vice-president of purchasing there, was fair, honest, and very demanding. “He was very much a

Ron Casbon warns against managers playing it too safe. He has always encouraged his people to take prudent risks in the quest for better results.

taskmaster; he had a work ethic second to none!” recalls Casbon. “He wanted everyone to try their best, and exhibited that behavior in his personal approach to his job.”

Kegg’s standards meshed with Casbon’s ideas. By the late 1980s, Ron Casbon was division purchasing agent for the company’s Structural Products division; by the mid-1990s, he was the manager of capital and MRO purchasing. And by 1997, Casbon had become the general manager of capital, MRO, services and reclamation, responsible for an annual spend of \$850 million. There, he led the transformation of the department from a traditional tactical approach to a strategic focus in all procurement activities.

On his career journey, Casbon’s leadership stance in turn made a difference to those who worked for him—so much so that in 1998 and 1999, his department was recognized by Purchasing magazine as among the “Best Places to Work.” Recalls Francis Farris, a strategic sourcing manager who worked for Casbon for five years: “Without a doubt, they were the most successful and positive years for me at Bethlehem Steel. Ron constantly showed a genuine inter-

est in his buyers and encouraged us to express our ideas. He respected differences of opinion.”

In 2000, Ron Casbon took on leadership of Bethlehem’s transportation and logistics operations, where he led the reorganization of dispersed activities into one centralized department. When the steel company folded, he joined Bayer Corp. as the chemicals company’s director of procurement for indirect materials and services, a stra-

tegic sourcing activity across multiple business units that accounted for an annual spend of \$950 million.

Challenge: The Greatest Driver

But it is outside the workplace where Casbon has found some of his most satisfying professional moments. He was heavily involved in the Lehigh Valley chapter of NAPM (now the Institute for Supply Management) as past president, vice-president and at one stage as director of national affairs. He strongly encouraged his lieutenants to become involved, too. Professional association activities are “a great way to develop leadership skills in a completely non-threatening way,” he says. His roles were recognized in 1998 when he received the Distinguished Service Award for outstanding contributions to the chapter, and then the following year as “Leadership Person of the Year” for the NAPM district.

If there’s a final insight about leadership that Ron Casbon has to share, it’s this: It is not the material rewards that drive people—it’s the challenge. He is living proof of that—and so are the many supply chain professionals he has influenced to date.