



X. YOU CAN ALWAYS DO BETTER

Age: 19-20

It was early 1976 and we were peaking. We had firmly positioned ourselves for success in our marketplace and the future was looking bright for everyone. We had been number one in district sales volume for some time and we were getting the attention of corporate as well as our competitors in the mall. When district, regional managers and auditors visited they instantly saw the store's transformation. Mostly there was disbelief, but to me it was just another day at the office. Nothing less than being our best at all times was acceptable and that is how we operated. This was the work ethic I inherited from my manager in Jacksonville and it became the DNA of my entire sales team.

Chess King store managers were an extremely talented and highly competitive group. Primarily because we all knew each other and everyone wanted bragging rights. But that is where our motivation to excel ended. Corporate didn't do much to elevate or inspire performance on a competitive level beyond the weekly newsletter accolades and these had now grown stale. Our numbers had grown to a point where it became monotonous reporting on our success. We were in need of some new challenges and goals. Being driven as much as we were and without a challenger within the company, we set our sights outside of it. We turned our attention to our competitors in the mall.

One in particular, Merry-Go-Round, was a giant in our product category. Outperforming them required implementing strategies that required being creative and went beyond appealing to men. They were nearby in the mall and in addition to selling similar brand menswear, they also sold womenswear and shoes. We needed to attract customers who had not made us their original destination and women buyers who were shopping for the men in their life. Wives, mothers, sisters, and grandmothers. And, we needed to get them before they shopped for themselves. I knew if they did and saw in the same store what they wanted on the menswear side we would lose them.

Surpassing sales numbers that included womenswear and shoes would not be an easy task. At that time, womenswear sales accounted for three times menswear sales and with shoes on top of that it was a big hill to climb, but we were ready for the challenge. We went after them with everything we had.

We had to be innovative in how we promoted and positioned our product, specifically sale merchandise. Corporate policy had been to put sale items in the back of the store believing customers would go to the rear of the store and in the process see other things they might like. That rarely worked. If they were already inside we would already be serving them. This wasn't ever going to increase store traffic. We needed to get the mall customer close enough to make contact. Once we did, the show was on our court.

The solution was simple. Put all of the sale items in the front of the store and hang signs everywhere. If necessary we would position our racks forward enough in the mall to stop walk by traffic. The idea at the time was novel, but it worked. Traffic soared.

I learned right there and then, just when you think you have reached your peak all it takes is renewed desire to be better and that is exactly what you will be. We surpassed MGR and its sister store Davey Jones Locker's sales numbers in the mall and that did not sit well with them. Sales numbers were reported to and by the mall, so we all knew how everyone else was doing. It couldn't be kept a secret and as a result there were rumblings over at MGR and unfortunately people were being fired.

This came into full view one day when some of their corporate management team came into our store to see what we were doing. Word internally there was, who are those guys, are they that good, or are we that bad. The idea that a store with only menswear could outsell them with all of their assets was perceived as impossible. Especially with a company who was as aggressive as they were.

Naive to who they were at the time, we did what we always did and put on a selling show the likes of which they hadn't seen before. This is where new doors to opportunity started to open. Their motto was if we can't beat you we will hire you. Chess King had become indifferent. They were quite satisfied with average and weren't willing to pay for excellent.

Having abandoned commissions and placing managers on salary the previous year, I had already taken a hit on my income and there was no additional financial reward for performance. I was holding out hope that they would make it up to me come annual review time when store managers were given pay raises. That time had come. I had everything going for me and expected to be well compensated for all that I had accomplished. I was also looking forward with great anticipation for new opportunities that might lie ahead.