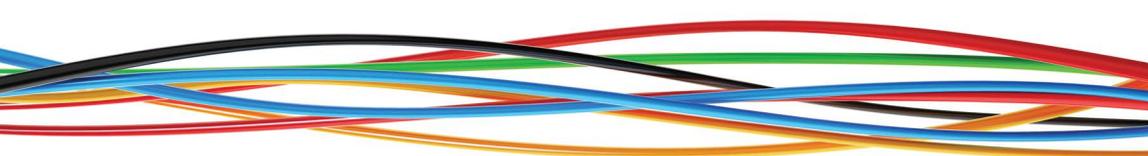


# WIRED DIFFERENTLY

*PREVIEW*



**PART I**  
LEADERSHIP  
THROUGH SERVICE

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**PART I**  
**LEADERSHIP**  
**THROUGH SERVICE**

## **Not Your Everyday Merger**

*To give real service you must add something which cannot be bought or measured with money, and that is sincerity and integrity.*

— Douglas Adams

There are few examples that better contrast the cooperative business model with the investor-owned corporation than the true story of an attempted take-over where money is no object and, ultimately, not the governing value.

It was a crisp October day in 2006 when our team of five executives from National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC) sat in the boardroom of our corporate suitor. A take-over was in the making for the nearly fifty-year-old software cooperative we represented.

The gathering that day was the culmination of three other meetings we'd had with the mergers and acquisitions team, whose due diligence had led them to the belief that NISC was possibly the best intellectual property gem of its kind. They had been looking far and wide for a software company like NISC, and in their considered opinion, NISC would fit in nicely with their portfolio of companies.

Our suitor's chief executive officer cut to the chase: "Today we are here to consummate a business deal with NISC. I have a checkbook in my hand, Vern," he said as he looked at me, "and I am asking you to fill in the amount it will take to buy NISC and make it a very integral part of our corporation."

Talk about an icebreaker!

## **PART II**

### **VALUES IN ACTION**

#### **The Result of Employees Doing the Right Thing**

When NISC employee Mike Weber tuned in to the Weather Channel on the morning of August 19, 2007, he was told that a freakish seventeen inches of rain had fallen in Rushford, Minnesota, over the previous twenty-four hours. Mike was familiar with the Rushford area and knew that the town was situated in a valley with a river running through the middle of it, very near Tri-County Electric Cooperative Inc., one of NISC's member/customers.

It being a Sunday, he checked with the on-call team at NISC and, as he had suspected, they had numerous reports of outages among Tri-County's customer base. Next, Mike called Doug Remboldt, the head of his division (now the vice president of Utility & Shared Services). Doug related a call that he'd received from Kaye Bernard at Tri-County, who had told him that the basement of the cooperative building was totally flooded and the main floor was under four feet of water, completely out of service, and all of their systems were in peril.

Mike and Doug decided to do something. Early that afternoon, they met at the NISC office in Mandan, North Dakota, and began to assemble a server and ten computers, along with other network equipment. The details of their plan were developing as they went, but their intention was to build a replacement network for the cooperative, travel to Rushford to install it and get the cooperative back online. They spent all day Sunday getting the equipment together and left first thing Monday morning for Rushford, a little over eight hours away. They hoped that when they got to Tri-County the cooperative's back-up tape could be used to restore the records.

When Mike and Doug arrived in Rushford, they found that many of the Tri-County employees were dealing with their own personal crises. Their homes were flooded and filled with mud, yet at work they were doing whatever they could with whatever they had available to restore power to the community and their customers. Mike and Doug were directed to an old trailer located at the airport on the hill above the flooded valley. It was the best, driest option available. The trailer was dirty, dusty and full of dog hair, but it would work as a site for the replacement network. By Monday evening, the two men had a computer system with current records up and running.

Kaye had secured lodging for them in a nearby town twenty miles away, but with everyone so busy, they overlooked the fact that there would be no after-hours security to protect all of the equipment they had worked so hard to install. How did Mike and Doug respond to this? They slept in the trailer overnight; one of them on the couch and the other on the floor with a pillow and blanket, keeping watch over the system. The next morning when Mike got up, he jumped in the shower to start the day. He came out of the bathroom at 7:30 a.m. and was greeted by ten Tri-County employees already at the computers, responding to customer needs.

Interestingly, neither Mike nor Doug question their decision when they talk about their Sunday afternoon choice to pack up \$100,000 worth of NISC equipment without the formal authority to do so. Nor do they second-guess their decision to drive over 550 miles toward a natural disaster and set up valuable equipment that would likely never return to NISC and for which no payment had yet been discussed. Both men view their role as a small piece of the recovery process for Tri-County Electric, viewing the employees of the cooperative as the ones who made the greatest sacrifice. From my vantage point, I couldn't be prouder of their choices.

As Potter Stewart's quote at the beginning of this chapter says, "Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do

**"Out of crisis like this you see how important a relationship of service becomes."**

**– Brian Krambeer**

and what is right to do." According to policy, Doug and Mike didn't have the proper authority to take \$100,000 worth of NISC equipment, but according to NISC's

ethical standards they did the right thing by taking the equipment to Rushford and helping one of our members become whole again. And at NISC, ethics trump policy.

A few months after the ordeal, I visited with Tri-County's president and CEO, Brian Krambeer, and he shared with me his thoughts on Mike and Doug's actions. "I used to look at the sum of money we paid to NISC each month and wonder what we were really getting for that expense," he said. "I know NISC has been a good company, but after the flood I really know what kind of company it is and how it stands behind us. I will never again wonder about that expense, and I now gratefully pay it each month. Sometimes it takes a crisis to know who really stands behind you, but out of a crisis like this you see how important a relationship of service becomes."

**PART III**  
**COLLABORATIVE CULTURE**  
**IN PRACTICE**

## **What's Next after a Great Culture Is Established?**

The Lakota, a Native American tribe who are part of the Great Sioux Nation, have a wonderful expression that reflects the connectedness of all beings. The expression is *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which means “All are related.” At first glance, this idea might seem contrary to how things are in today’s work world, where there is much talk of the generational differences between employees within organizations. On one end of the spectrum, some employees are just grateful to have a job, while many on the other end would seriously consider leaving the company over something like the dress code being too stringent.

Our management team spends a good amount of time discussing the generational differences we see at NISC. We find that the gap is widening and the differences are becoming more evident. The range in age goes from teenagers to seventy-somethings; we have employees who could be grandchildren of other employees. Three generations under one roof. That could be really intense. But it’s not in our case, and here’s why.

Ask any NISC employee what matters most in our service to customers, and you will hear something along the lines of *do the right thing, always*. I talked about this earlier when discussing the shared values committee and their ownership of our values statement. Universally, NISC employees get it. They might not be able to repeat our mission or vision statements verbatim, but everyone at NISC knows that we all need to dig deep and ask the tough questions so that we do the right thing with our every action.

You may be thinking, so what makes the statement *Mitakuye Oyasin* so special? I’ll tell you, because it’s in that answer that we find what is next after a great culture is established. Regardless of what generation we belong to, each one of us has an innate need to make a difference during our life. We want to know that our physical presence on this planet means something. We can make a difference through words of encouragement to our spouse and children; it can manifest itself in the

time we dedicate to causes we believe in or philanthropy because we've been financially blessed.

Employees of all ages appreciate and thrive in an organization whose culture aligns with their personal values. At NISC our shared values and servant leadership culture have combined with our work to maintain, grow and recruit great employees. This combination has laid the foundation for a truly magnetic culture that crosses traditional boundaries and brings like-minded people together for the same purpose. The work we do at NISC matters because the relationships we build and the needs of those we serve matter. It is true: we are each wonderfully special and unique, but we are all related. *Mitakuye Oyasin*. At NISC, we all make up the same organization with a singular focus to do the right thing. Always.