

BUSINESS JET TRAVELER[®]

2012 AIN Publications. Reprinted from bjtonline.com by permission of *Business Jet Traveler*.

BJT Management Series: Directional Aviation Capital's Kenn Ricci

BJT Waypoints by JENNIFER LEACH ENGLISH



Kenn Ricci is the principal of Directional Aviation Capital, which owns Flight Options, Nextant Aerospace, Constant Aviation and Sentient Jet. He is also the author of the leadership book *Management by Trust*. Little-known fact: Ricci was Bill Clinton's pilot when he ran for president in 1992. He is a philanthropist who recently held a benefit at his home that raised more than \$1 million for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. Below, he comments on his life and management style.

Pay fanatical attention to detail in all aspects of the operation. Take a long-term approach to relationships with

those who come in contact with the company. Recognize that employees are the foundation of a service company.

When I look at a business, I always think: Does this company have a unique competitive advantage? What is that advantage, how sustainable is it and can it be duplicated?

Management by trust means celebrating an organization's core of great employees and assumes that they are there to work hard and do their best to contribute to the company's success.

Our expense policy is "use your best judgment." A lot of companies tend to ignore the good and focus on the bad, and set up all of these rules about how much employees can spend for dinner when they are on the road. If you hired correctly, you need to trust that they can make these decisions with good judgment.

Sometimes employees will abuse your trust, but most will rise to the level of responsibility you invest in them.

All of our managers are required to give commendation reports so they are aware of how often they are giving praise as opposed to criticism.

Whatever metric you set up is how action will be influenced. If I sat outside my office with a clipboard, and every time someone came to work with a pink shirt I put a big check next to their names, people would start showing up in pink shirts even if they didn't know why.

I have a time every Friday where employees can call in and have a frank conversation with me and ask me anything.

Inevitably the person who is taking advantage of the system and not giving 100 percent is the person who complains.

I remind all of my managers to be cognizant of all the births and deaths in employees' lives and be supportive. We give a \$5,000 reimbursement to any employee who adopts a child.

My father was an undercover agent for the U.S. government, involved in the organized-crime drive. Three or four times a year he would go undercover. He later became George Steinbrenner's accountant, and Steinbrenner owned a bunch of air shows. I got summer jobs at these shows and that's how I was first exposed to flying.

In 1992, Corporate Wings had two Gulfstreams that we were leasing out for long-term charters, mostly for rock tours. One of the brokers called and asked if we had ever done a political campaign. He said he needed a plane for 14 months for a candidate running for president. I said, "Well, who is it?" He said, "It's the governor of Arkansas." I said, "The governor of Arkansas is not going to need a plane for 14 months." I actually made them pay for the last month up front.

Bill Clinton is the smartest guy I have ever met. He once said to me that to be successful in politics, you need to be able to do just four things correctly: agree, defend, attack and propose.

The time when Clinton had been elected but was not yet inaugurated was the most interesting flying of my life. You have full Secret Service, code words every day.

My dad taught me that when you die all you can take with you is who you love and what you know. You keep nothing material. You have to give back.

Sooner or later you have to come face to face with your choices and decide whether, on balance, you've made good ones or bad ones.

Father Hesburgh [president emeritus of Notre Dame] was and still is a huge influence on my life. He taught me to respect all views and to champion the causes of the underprivileged. He said there are only three things you need to do to have a successful life: honor your god, be as good as your parents and champion the cause of underdogs.

I made a pact with myself in 2007 to never complain about anything ever again. ■

Jennifer Leach English welcomes comments and suggestions at jenglish@ainonline.com.