

The Blueberry Story

JAMIE ROBERT VOLLMER

"If I ran my business the way you people operate your schools, I wouldn't be in business very long!"

I stood before an auditorium filled with indignant teachers who were becoming angrier by the minute.

I represented a business roundtable dedicated to improving public schools. I said that public schools were antiquated and that teachers and administrators were a major part of the problem: They resisted change, hunkered down in their feathered nests, protected by a monopoly. They needed to look to business. We knew how to produce quality. Zero defects! Continuous improvement! TQM! [Total Quality Management]

As soon as I finished, a woman's hand shot up. She appeared polite, pleasant—she was, in fact, a razor-edged high school English teacher who had been waiting to unload.

She began quietly: "We are told, sir, that you manage a company that makes good ice cream."

I smugly replied, "*People* magazine chose our blueberry as 'The Best Ice Cream in America,' ma'am."

"How nice," she said. "Is it rich and smooth?"

"Sixteen percent butterfat," I crowed.

"Premium ingredients?" she inquired.

"Superpremium! Nothing but AAA." I was on a roll. I never saw the next line coming.

"Mr. Vollmer," she said, leaning forward with a wicked eyebrow raised to the sky, "when you are standing on your receiving dock and you see an inferior shipment of blueberries arrive, what do you do?"

In the silence of that room, I could hear the trap snap. I knew I was dead, but I wasn't going to lie.

"I send them back."

"That's right!" she barked, "and we can never send back our blueberries. We take them big, small, rich, poor, gifted, exceptional, abused, frightened, confident, homeless, rude, and brilliant. We take them with ADHD, junior rheumatoid arthritis, and English as their second language. We take them all! Every one! And that, Mr. Vollmer, is why it's not a business. It's a school!"

In an explosion, all 290 teachers, principals, bus drivers, aides, custodians, and secretaries jumped to their feet and yelled, "Yeah! Blueberries! Blueberries!"

And so my long transformation began.



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I have learned that, unlike business, schools are unable to control the quality of their raw material; they are constantly mauled by a howling horde of disparate, competing customer groups; and they are dependent upon the vagaries of politics for a reliable revenue system.

None of this negates the need for change. We must change what, when, and how we teach to give all children maximum opportunity to thrive in a postindustrial society. But these changes can occur only with the understanding, trust, permission, and active support of the surrounding community—for the most important thing I have learned is that schools reflect the attitudes, beliefs, and the health of the communities they serve, and therefore improving public education means more than changing our schools, it means changing America. [Published with permission.]