



# Wise Man of Warehousing: Kenneth B. Ackerman

By John Kerr

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There really is not much that anyone can teach Ken Ackerman about warehousing. And even if there was, he would probably turn right around and teach it to others.

Case in point: The time when he worked closely with a dock foreman at a family-owned warehousing firm, coaching him in all that it takes to become a well-rounded logistics leader. That individual would later become the firm's director of logistics and procurement. "I don't think I've ever enjoyed anything more," says Ackerman of that coaching experience.

Ken Ackerman's name is virtually synonymous with the discipline of warehousing. He has spent his entire professional career in the warehousing and logistics industry, from his stint as a buyer in the U.S. Army to his years as chief executive of a national logistics company through the last decade and a half as head of his own consulting firm. He has written extensively on the subject, authoring seminal texts such as *Warehousing Profitably* and acting as editor and publisher of industry publications such as the subscription newsletter, *Warehousing Forum*.

Ackerman also carries the gospel of warehousing in dedicated seminars, both domestically and abroad. And he has been an assiduous promoter of the profession, co-founding the influential Warehousing Education and Research Council (WERC) and setting the agenda in a variety of leadership roles, including president of the Council of Logistics

Management (now the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals, or CSCMP.)

### Education a Lifetime Passion

But for much of the last decade, Ackerman's other passion has been education—specifically, kindergarten through high school graduation. "Sadly, our public schools are failing," he says. "They're producing kids who are semi-literate. That is a huge danger to the future of the country." When Ackerman cites cultures that venerate learning—those in rapidly developing nations such as India and China—it's easy to see what drove him to found an independent

charter school in his home town of Columbus, Ohio. Although the school has already graduated his grandchildren and Ackerman has long since given up official leadership roles at the school, he remains wedded to the concept as a primary means of shoring up the U.S. skills base. One of the school's key objectives is funding scholarships to children who ordinarily could not afford to go to a private educational institution. In laying the strategic foundations for the school, Ackerman looked beyond the specifics of curriculum development. "A principal once told me that the essence of a great school is having so many programs and activities that every kid can leave being a star at something," he says. "Kids should leave school with great self-esteem."

But that laudable sentiment does not translate into automatic dispensation of "gold stars" for all—it speaks to Ackerman's view of the foun-



**Ken Ackerman has been an enduring champion of the logistics and warehousing profession.**



dations for success in life. Ask him about leadership development in the working world and he cites the military as the ideal. "Leadership has to be taught and experiences in leadership have to be given. But leadership must be earned," he says. "The stripes on a cadet's sleeves can say 'cadet captain' but then it's up to that cadet to get others to follow."

Ackerman has very clear ideas about what constitutes great leadership. "First of all, every good leader is a good communicator. Along with that, it's the ability to inspire people—that's a particular kind of communication," he notes. Next on Ackerman's leadership list is empathy—the willingness to find out and to care about the feelings of those being led, and a key factor in inspiring loyalty. It should go without saying, but leadership also involves setting the ethical example. Then comes a characteristic that speaks to leadership excellence: The ability to recruit and retain good people. "One of the greatest leaders I ever met was [Ohio State football coach] Woody Hayes," says Ackerman. "He was extremely vocal in saying that the most important work he ever did was not on side on the sidelines of the football field but at kitchen tables all over America, trying to recruit the next generation of players."

Ackerman himself is adept at picking leaders. As a key player in the earliest days of the National Council of Physical Distribution Management (NCPDM)—the trade group founded in 1963 that would eventually become CSCMP—he helped identify many of those who would become presidents of the organization. These days, he regularly teaches leadership essentials, with an emphasis on best practice in recruiting and retaining top talent. "It's about selecting people, growing people, correcting people, and cutting people," he says. That last point is key: Good leaders must set expectations clearly and grade employees according to how well they meet those

expectations, but they will quickly and respectfully replace employees who consistently fail to come up to the performance standards set.

### Elevating the Profession

Over his 50-plus year career, Ken Ackerman has practiced everything that he preaches today. Graduating from Princeton University, he went straight to Harvard Business School, where he earned his Masters in Business Administration. He then enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving for two years as a buyer at the Walter Reed medical facility and learning the basics both on the job and through the homework study that his boss regularly assigned him.

At that time, Ackerman's father ran a small warehousing and trucking business, and after his enlistment was up, Ackerman joined his dad at the firm. But the young man was nervous about working in his father's shadow, and the elder Ackerman knew it. "I know you don't want to be Junior in the next office," Ackerman recalls his father saying, before sending his son to run one of the company's warehouses in another city. Over the next two decades, Ackerman assumed control of the company, selling off the truck leasing operations and expanding activities to turn Distribution Centers Inc. into a warehousing powerhouse in eight cities across the region.

During that time, Ackerman became deeply involved in helping to elevate the warehousing and logistics professions. An active NCPDM member, he also saw a need for a professional society dedicated to warehousing—a group that would provide a blend of educational, research and networking opportunities for warehousing professionals. In 1977, Ackerman and others in the distribu-

tion field founded WERC as the only professional organization focused on warehouse management and its role in the supply chain.

However, back in his chief executive seat at Distribution Centers Inc., Ackerman saw no long-term future for himself in a small company, and he began looking for an exit. In 1980, at age 48, he managed the sale of the company to Exel Logistics USA. He joined the management consulting division of Coopers & Lybrand, the professional services firm that had been Distribution Centers' auditing firm. A year later, he hung out his own shingle as The K.B. Ackerman Company, a boutique management

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advisory firm serving manufacturers, wholesale distributors, retailers, warehousing firms, and carriers.

Today, Ackerman's schedule is as packed as ever. Besides editing and publishing *Warehousing Forum* and writing on a wide range of supply chain themes, he continues to help warehousing professionals learn more about leadership. Many of his clients are family-run firms not unlike the organization that he once ran, and much of the value that he adds comes directly from that experience. "Family businesses interest me a lot," he says. He believes that such businesses are fragile in a fast-paced global economy that is fueled by highly mobile financial capital. Many of those businesses are still led by managers who started out as hourly paid workers.

So it's fair to say that this wise man of warehousing will be sharing his industry insights and business savvy for many more years—and having great fun doing it.