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## Charles Walker: Man on a Mission

What is the mark of a successful business? Is it hard work? Ingenuity? Adaptive ability? High profits? You might say that the answer is a combination of all four. But even if a company has all of these qualities, there's one more that every business needs to make it truly successful: a strong leader. A good leader has grit and integrity, but a kind and compassionate heart. Charles Walker's companies flourished under his strong leadership and were led to their victory by his innovative ideas.

Charles—or Charlie, as he was known—was born into poverty on May 27, 1932. Growing up in Salina, Kansas, he was the oldest in a family where he and his siblings often went hungry because they couldn't afford food. Though he went to Salina public schools until ninth grade and wanted to continue on to college, he made the difficult decision to drop out of school and start working to support his family. He wanted to help them leave their poverty behind and have a better future someday. Charlie worked in construction first, and then found a job at a steel mill in Colorado before enlisting in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. During his 4½ year term in the flight engineering division, he learned the importance of self-discipline and got an understanding of what it takes to be successful. Those were values he would take with him through all of his life, and eventually, lead to his success as a businessman (Kelly). At every job, Charlie was determined to work hard and he poured his heart into what he was doing, knowing it would help the people he loved.

After his time in the Air Force, Charlie worked briefly in Seattle before settling in Salina with his family. He started his first business in 1957, delivering wholesale candy and tobacco to other small businesses in the area. The income from this job was enough to support his wife and six children, but he wasn't happy with what he was doing and wanted to move on to something new. Charlie had seen vacuum trucks in Colorado that were used to clean air supply and heating duct work. He liked the idea, but was sure he could make a better machine. And with determination and grit, he did just that. After succeeding with his Power Vac truck, he designed a mobile power wash unit which quickly became his main focus. ("Charles W. "Charlie" Walker").

In his travels selling the cleaning equipment, Charlie noticed a need for high-quality, professional, truck and car washes. Many of his customers were semitruck drivers, and he wanted to better meet their needs by providing a 24-hour, full-service truck washing facility. Like any good business owner, he knew he should serve his customers in the best way he could so they would continue using his services. But it was also in his nature to notice the ways he could best help his customers, because he cared about them as people and not just as a source of income.

The first Blue Beacon Truck Wash opened in Salina in 1973 and quickly became very popular in the trucking industry. It was valued not only for its quality service, but for the quality way Charlie treated both employees and customers alike. He cared deeply about this aspect of business, and it shows—there are multigenerational employees working at his companies today ("About our car wash"). Soon after, a

self-service car wash joined the lineup. In these businesses especially, Charlie cemented his mission of consideration, kindness, and hard work.

In the early 2000s, as water costs rose and environmental issues became more of a problem, Charlie decided that his company needed to change. He channeled his natural determination and created three new companies based on water conservation in the vehicle wash industry. Instead of staying stuck in his ways and refusing to change, Charlie looked ahead and realized he needed to adjust how his businesses were operating to make a positive impact on the future.

Although Charlie eventually grew rich from his many successful businesses, he never forgot his humble roots and was an avid supporter of countless charities. It was important to him to give back to the community so others could have the opportunities he'd tried so hard to reach. He founded many organizations for the Salina community, with the most widely known being the Rolling Hills Zoo and Wildlife Museum ("About our car wash"). However, closest to his heart was the Tammy Walker Cancer Center, named after his daughter who passed away from lung cancer at the age of 11. His skillful leadership and many contributions to the community were recognized and appreciated, and he was inducted to the Salina Business Hall of Fame in 2005. Charlie passed away in April of 2012, but his legacy lives on through his example.

The story of Charlie Walker is a perfect illustration of how success comes with leadership and good values. His mission in business was to offer the best services he could and make a positive impact on his customers, without compromising his integrity and morals. In fact, he had a personal standard that sums up his career: "If you don't do it right, don't do it at all" (Demuth). Charlie's life inspires young people everywhere to follow his example of hard work, dedication, and strong leadership to make their own best impacts on the world of business around them.

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Note: When I placed a citation after an entire paragraph, I used that source to get most of the information for the paragraph.

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