

Attitude

Why yours isn't good enough

By Karl Winkler

I have a few distinct memories of when the concept of 'Attitude' was crystal clear for me. A particular one happened when I was working in LA as an independent studio tech. You know, in the old days when tape machines needed aligning, and consoles could often be fixed with a VOM and a soldering iron. But I digress. A good friend of mine, Carter Humphrey, was the chief engineer at Larrabee West studios in West Hollywood. He would regale me with

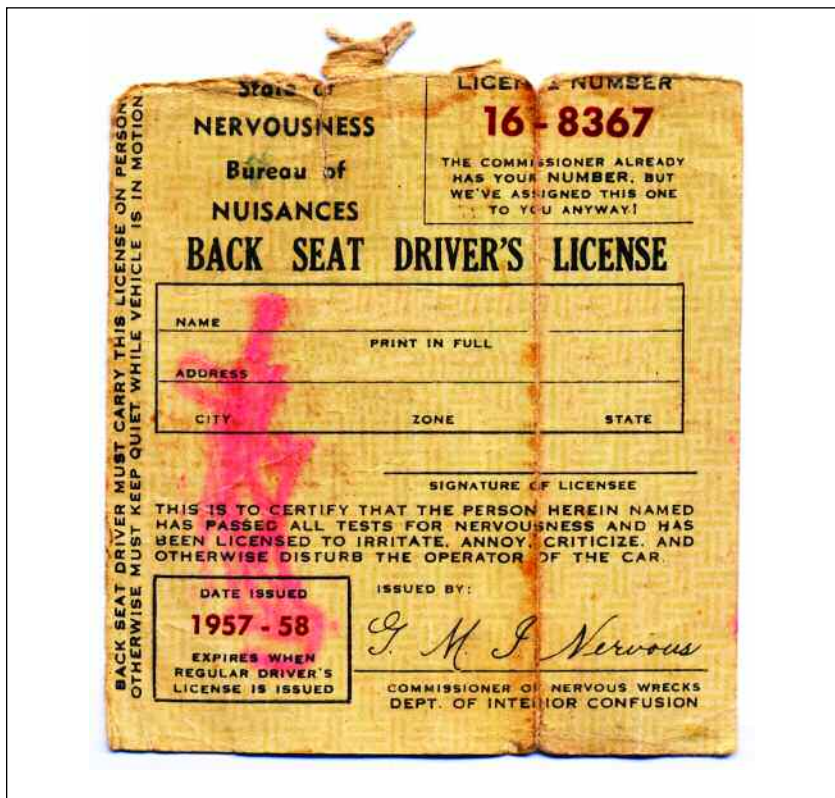
funny stories about rap posses (even if you didn't know that this was already happening in the early 1990s, you have no trouble believing this, right?) and NS10 speakers being 'flamed' on a regular basis whenever a certain big-name mix engineer would be in session.

One day he was describing to me that a new runner was just hired, and that unlike the usual slackers that would come in and be gone within a few days, this new kid was amazing.

"You should see the refrigerator," Carter would say. "Even *I* would eat out of it now," he would tell me. "And the bathroom is, like, *clean*" as if 'clean' were a newly discovered word in the English language.

Carter would tell me about this guy from time to time and how he always worked hard, went the extra mile, and *knew his place*. This impressed me and although I don't know what that 'kid' is doing now, my guess is that he has a good job somewhere and is probably prominent in whatever field he ended up choosing for a career.

Another memory where the concept of attitude had clarity was when I was giving a lecture at Full Sail some years ago, as a guest of Daren Millar (at the time, the head of Industry Relations). I was getting set up in the lecture room, and Daren asked me if I had everything I needed. I mumbled something about 'well, I usually like to have a cup of water for when I talk. You know, all that hot air makes my mouth dry' and almost before I finished talking, two of the students who had been standing nearby bolted out the door. At first, I didn't even realize why they ran from the room. But then they each came back about two minutes later with bottled water for me. I didn't even have to really ask. Turns out they had raced each other to the faculty lounge to get water. I was impressed, and once again, I would have to think that today, they are probably successful at their respective careers. Daren and I spoke about that incident several times in the following



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years because it epitomized 'great attitude' and was an example for the other students to follow.

MASTER AND PUPIL

Although these two stories are closer to the audio business, the lessons about attitude transcend our industry. My first clear memories of learning attitude came from a guy I knew in high school. Ted Grivas was a senior when I was a freshman, and he was one of those guys that could draw a crowd simply by standing there and talking. Of course when you had to leave, it was usually a good idea to come up with a convenient excuse, such as that you left your bathtub running, or suddenly had a funeral come up...

But Ted's biggest thing was that he would talk about attitude, although I don't remember him calling it that. But later, as I matured, I realized that this is indeed what he was talking about. He would say things like "you should just be the absolute best at whatever you choose to do. If your job is to roll tires from the back of the tire store to the front, you should be so good at it that people would pay to see you roll those tires. Just imagine rolling tires in a circus with thousands of people watching".

After high school, Ted went on to North Texas State in Denton to study music. There, he started up *Dial a Quartet* in the Dallas metro area, which was a music booking and management service for string quartets and other ensembles. Since I was also a string musician, Ted would tell me things like: "If you want gigs, there are a few rules that you should follow. First, make absolutely certain that everyone arrives together. Make sure the music stands match. Make sure that everyone is dressed in the same color of black, and the same color of white. Only the group leader should talk to the patron or host. Have your music organized in black notebooks – none of this sheet music falling off the stand stuff" and so on.

Well, when I went to college, I formed a string quartet and started doing a few gigs. These turned into more gigs, and after a few years we

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were doing very steady work. I do think that there were other groups in town (Tucson, AZ) that were probably better in terms of musicianship. But ours was the most polished because we followed Ted's rules to the letter. And thus we appeared to be more professional and ended up getting most of the gigs in town.

Later on, I started reading some writings by Zen poets and authors. One story in particular stands out:

The young student approached the Zen master and asked:

'Master, I'm just starting out. What should I do to learn the way?'

The master replied 'Chop wood and carry water'.

After several years of this, the young apprentice approached the master again:

'Master, I've gained a lot of experience. What should I do next?'

The master replied 'Chop wood and carry water'

Years later, the apprentice felt that he had reached a new level and approached the master:

'Master, what do you do now since you are a Zen master?'

The master replied: 'Chop wood and carry water.'

What I think it comes down to is that it really doesn't matter what you do, it is how you approach it. And I think most of us would agree that good help is hard to come by. And we might even agree that the most common element is attitude. Poor help has many forms: lack of initiative, lack of technical skills, lack of professionalism, lack of punctuality, lack of responsibility. But the single element that ties all of these things together and truly makes or breaks someone's chances for further employment is *attitude*.

How many times have you kept someone because they worked hard, listened, showed up on time and treated customers and fellow employees with respect, even when that person may not have known his or her way around the console? Or how about the guy who is god's gift to monitors, but unfortunately he knows it and treats others poorly? Or doesn't clean up the shop after he's done wiring up the new power distro? It's only a matter of time before he either moves on (voluntarily or not) since neither of you can stand each other.

BEFORE YOU ACCUSE ME, TAKE A LOOK AT YOURSELF

There's a great line in a Simpsons episode, where Homer gets into real trouble, as usual, and exclaims "This is everybody's fault but mine!" And I'd guess that we all feel that way from time to time. And frankly, sometimes it's even true. But more often than not, we are the common element in the problems we face. I remember one gig at a jazz festival in Norman, OK, where a whole lot more people showed up than I think the promoter had anticipated. It was outdoors, and the PA was inadequate for the job. And at the time, I was very inexperienced. So instead of helping to



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improve the situation, I did some things that screwed stuff up. Instead of relying on the local crew to manage monitor wedges, I went up there before our set and unplugged things. True, cables should have been labeled. But why didn't I label them myself? Or just leave them alone and trust the local guys?

Then when our band hit the stage, I didn't make an effort to go out the

crowd and check coverage, or volume levels in different areas. At the time, I didn't even think about requesting delay stacks. Well, the result was that for a few hundred people, the sound was OK and we made it through the gig. But for thousands, they could barely hear the band and the mix was atrocious. I had not taken into account that at the mix position, I was hearing trumpets,

drums and trombones acoustically, but of course further out, this was not happening and so all most people heard was saxophones and piano – what I was pumping through the PA. It was a disaster.

We actually received a letter from a disgruntled audience member describing the problems in detail, and claiming that “the sound guy must be an amateur”. I wrote a letter in response and to summarize, I claimed “this was everybody's fault but mine” even though indeed, I was an inexperienced mixer. Later, I came to realize what an important role experience plays in mixing, because situations like this festival are far too common. Had my attitude been better, I would have picked up on the hints from those more experienced than I was, and perhaps made better decisions and provided a better experience for those festival-goers.

CHECK YOUR ATTITUDE AT THE DOOR

I think it's clear that the top pros in the business got there for a variety of reasons but I'd be willing to bet that along with business acumen, a great overall understanding of sound reinforcement, good people skills and excellent management capabilities, these people succeed because of carefully watching their own attitude. Their priorities are straight, they care about results, they want to continue improving the processes and the product, and they care about their people. And guess what? The money comes in as a result of these things, not the other way around. So before any of us claim that we know everything and those with different ideas should stay out of the way, we might benefit from our own past lessons of how important our attitude is, regardless of our job titles. To quote Hopper from *A Bug's Life*: ‘The first lesson of responsibility is that *everything* is your fault.’ ■

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