

# Vox Populi

**PETER LILIENTHAL PUTS CEOS IN TOUCH WITH THEIR EMPLOYEES.**

**R**estaurateurs and CEOs, Peter Lilienthal contends, suffer from the same inability to get unvarnished feedback.

"If a diner is having a mediocre meal, nine times out of 10, when the waiter or owner inquires about the food, the dissatisfied guest responds with 'just fine.' Then the patron doesn't return or, worse yet, bad-mouths the restaurant to friends. The restaurant's management often genuinely wants honest feedback, but doesn't get it. The result is everyone loses. Our society doesn't condition us to say what we truly think."

Lilienthal offers this analogy over lunch at one of Minneapolis' most acclaimed restaurants, Goodfellow's. The wait staff hovers near our table. Not surprising, since Lilienthal is both a frequent customer and the dean of local restaurant critics. His "Dining Out" column has been a mainstay of *MPLS.ST PAUL* (a sister publication to *Twin Cities Business Monthly*) for the last 22 years.

Yet though food and restaurants may be Lilienthal's passion, they are not the source of his daily bread. A Harvard Business School graduate, he has served in management roles at Tonka, Munsingwear, Toro, Jostens, and Hamline University. For the past seven years, he's also been building a successful company of his own, Management Communication Systems. His mission is to help CEOs and other corporate leaders improve the performance of their firms by listening to the straight skinny from their employees' minds and mouths. "During my days in the corporate world, I always wondered how senior management could be so blind-sided by problems they should have known about," he says.

Lilienthal's antidote for this mahogany-row information vacuum is a service he calls "In Touch." Employees simply dial a toll-free number, record their thoughts, and hang-up. In Touch's staff transcribes the messages and provides a written copy to the client. Employees can choose to identify themselves or to remain anonymous. Former Green Tree Financial CEO Larry Coss was the first executive to try In Touch (and the company still uses the service, even after its recent merger with Conseco). Next came Pillsbury, which has used the service for six years, has achieved dramatic successes with it, and even has won two national best practice awards because of it. Other clients around the country include American Express Financial Advisors, American Freightways, Coca-Cola Beverages, numerous health centers, and even the Washington State Highway Patrol. The City of Minneapolis now is experimenting with In Touch.

The major frustration in his dual role as CEO and salesman, Lilienthal admits, is actually getting through to senior executives so he can describe the benefits of In Touch. "Virtually every company that conducts employee surveys identifies communications as its number-one problem," he says. "And yet it's amazing how many corporate leaders don't appreciate how inaccessible they actually are. If I can't get through the bureaucracy to present an innovative idea, think about how tough it is for someone on the plant floor to be heard."

He's also beginning to fashion new ways for corporations to use In Touch. Several clients now use the service to get honest feedback for exit interviews, a



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critical source of input to improve employee retention. Lilienthal explains that more than half of the calls In Touch receives involve constructive ideas and suggestions or early warning signals—not gripes from malcontents.

What is it like to listen every day to what employees have to say about their employers and their workplaces? Lilienthal smiles over his glass of Chardonnay and says, "I have two of the most enjoyable jobs in the world; one is a treat for the senses, the other's a treat for the mind. But whether I'm dealing with a neighborhood cafe or a multinational corporation, my passion is helping enterprises improve through honest feedback." ■

—Dennis McGrath