



Centier Bank

Placing Its Money on Culture, Community

By Tom Schuman



You Should Know

The prime fifth-floor space in the new headquarters will be for the employee cafeteria and training room. A fitness center, offering a variety of programs, and expanded quiet areas will be included. "There are efficiencies to be gained and a family feeling to be gained," Schrage says. **Company summary on Page 62**

Michael Schrage admits that when he decided in 1972 to become the fourth generation of his family to be involved in the bank that his great-grandfather started in 1895 that "aggressive growth and earnings came before personal service and brand identity." Growth that annually exceeded 20% gave way to more modest increases following a "cultural watershed" in the mid-1980s. "Cultural preservation is my highest goal. That's the legacy I want to leave," Schrage notes.

"We have a servant leadership style here in which supervisors serve the people they supervise. I'm serving about 700 people now. I'm focused on making them happy," he adds. "I want them to tell me at the end of their time here, whether it's three years or 30 years, that this was one of the best chapters in their life."

Centier maintains its status as an independent bank despite expanding to 40-plus locations in five counties and more than \$1.6 billion in assets. Construction is in progress on a new Centier Corporate Center, a five-story, 72,000-square-foot building and campus that will be highly visible from the Interstate 65-U.S. 30 interchange in Merrillville, and home to approximately 300 Operations Center employees.

Success has come through taking care of its people – from the first day on the job and throughout their work and life experiences.

Chrisanne Christ, vice president and director of human resources, says Schrage personally sets the stage in an orientation program titled Foundations. "He meets with each group and shares a lot of personal information. They get to know the president." That sets the stage for future interactions

within the company and with customers.

"Many of our associates have strong personal relationships with their clients," adds Carol Highsmith, a senior partner. "That goes along with how active we get in the communities we serve. We develop stronger bonds with our client base."

Community involvement – whether it's financial support, walking the parade route or various other forms – is extensive. Hearing the shouts of people saying "that's my bank" when the Centier representatives pass by or reading the many letters that come in from appreciative clients makes it all worthwhile for Schrage.

"Events are investments for me in the cultural development of the company," states the president, who not only read a recent thank you letter to his officers at a regular meeting but personally delivered the message to the staff at the branch location that was receiving the accolades. "Every walk, parade, picnic is one more bonding element."

Centier has had an employee stock ownership plan since the late 1980s. It offers discounts and coordination assistance for both child care facilities and long-term care needs for associates and their families. Christ says an associate referral program typically provides more than half of the new company hires in a year.

Extensive training programs, Highsmith points out, have a strong focus on culture and service excellence. All job openings are first posted internally, but associates are often reluctant to leave their branch locations where they've developed the strong client and fellow associate relationships. During recent remodeling work, outside construction crews even commented on the friendliness and the great environment present. "We hear that from vendors all the time," Highsmith states.



Operations personnel will have a new company headquarters in 2008.



Centier employees emphasize their independent, community bank status during a local parade.