

Chapter 5:
Mister Roebuck



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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“The buck stops here.” This saying was popularized by President Harry Truman, who never ceased to be awed by the power and responsibilities of the highest office in the land.

This saying is appropriate not only for the highest office, but for offices at any level. School administrators, harassed by the increasing demand for administrative reports, performance indicators, state and federal compliance regulations and increased accountability, commonly find themselves having to delegate more and more the traditional duties of their office. This is especially critical for top administrators, the school superintendent and the campus principal who are perceived as the chief executive officers in their respective domains.

The need for delegation of responsibility is complicated by the need to handle the “buck,” that is, to deal with many sensitive decisions that should be made at the highest level. In addition to dealing with high level decisions, the top administrator has to be accessible to students, parents, teachers, sales persons and others that wish to deal with only the highest level administrator. Each person perceives his/her problem, interest or concern as important enough to merit the consideration of the top administrator.

The best lesson on administrator access I received was not in the educational administration training program, but as a part-time worker at a Sears-Roebuck store before I attained either of the two administrative offices, and this lesson served me well in both educational positions.

I’ve always said that I became a teacher by choice and an administrator by economic necessity. Like so many other members of the teaching profession, teaching was a love that could only be afforded by extensive sacrifice. One common sacrifice that a teacher must make is having to moonlight in order to make a living and support the family. Although I sometimes had as many as five part-time jobs while I was teaching, the most consistent job was working at the Sears-Roebuck credit department. I worked there for eight consecutive years, on Monday and Thursday nights, on Saturdays and school holidays, and during the Christmas and summer vacations. As a matter of fact, most of the part-time staff in the credit office during irregular hours were teachers.

Although many businesses are now open during the evening hours, and some of these stores do a large part of their business “after hours,” during the 1950s department stores were just experimenting with the concept. It was not unusual for most of the regular work force to leave at five or six p.m. and have the part-time crew take over until nine or ten.

One evening, as was often the case, I was working at the Sears credit department. The night crew was under the supervision of a young manager trainee named John Roebuck. Suddenly, there was a big commotion at the entrance to the credit department as an irate customer walked in wanting to speak to the man in charge.

Being next in line to wait on customers, I walked up to him and asked if I could be of assistance.

“I want to speak to the man in charge,” he screamed at me. “I don’t want to speak with a flunky. I don’t want to speak to an assistant. I don’t want to speak to a department head. I want to speak to the top man in the store.”

“Just a minute,” I said. “I’ll have you speak to Mr. Roebuck.” Without hesitation, he responded, “Roebuck, hell! I want to speak to Mr. Sears.”