



Tools & Techniques

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Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

I read in a Phoenix newspaper last month of a human resource department manager who has been charged with reducing costs by reducing the work force. Ironically, he'll probably get a bonus based on how many people he can remove!

Rensis Likert once said, "If a corporation needs cash, it would do better to liquidate inventories. Inventories can be replaced readily, but highly effective human organizations cannot." Hardly a human resource professional questions the legitimacy of this statement. Yet how much influence has the profession had in preserving human assets during hard times?

When human assets are liquidated, along with them goes intellectual capital, employee commitment, customer loyalty and other less tangible assets. Yet these are the very means of creating efficient, cost-effective organizations that can withstand marketplace fluctuations. Consequently, organizations that report increased earnings by liquidating employees actually improve their temporary cash positions at the expense of their income-producing human assets.

So where are members of the human resource profession in this debate? Hopefully not justifying their bonuses through workforce reductions, but in the trenches meeting marketplace demands by enabling greater contributions from people; and in the boardrooms making the case for asset building, not asset liquidating.∞

Reconnecting Practice With Strategy

You carefully develop a vision and mission for the organization, communicate direction and expectations to employees, and launch strategic initiatives in support of the vision only to hear employees complain that management doesn't "walk the talk." This is not necessarily due to leaders who refuse to change - most people simply find it difficult to recognize the entrenched, often automatic, responses they give to common, day-to-day problems encountered in the workplace. As sincere as leaders may be, they often underestimate, or fail to recognize, the power of management practices that align with espoused strategic intent.

Leaders who frequently engage in practices that are inconsistent with the strategic direction of the organization are dragging the culture into cynicism

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Work Groups - More Problems!

Businesses often complain of departments or work groups that fail to accomplish as much as leaders expect. These groups may be responsible for the success of a critical process or project. Frequently, they work with other groups that find dealing with them difficult.

Managers usually describe these dysfunctions as problems with communication and with individuals who are unable to get along. They try to solve the problems with training programs on valuing differences, interpersonal communication skills, and personality profiles.

Such training programs are typically reported to be interesting and informative, but ineffective in solving the identified problems. This is because formal data collection processes are frequently bypassed in these situations leaving only the symptoms of the problems to be addressed in the training program. Core problems are almost always buried beneath the surface, are uncovered through formal data collection and analysis, and most effectual when conducted by an objective third-party.

Secondly, due to consequences inherent in leaping from symptoms to solutions, inappropriate solutions are often applied to problems. Once underlying issues are discovered, appropriate solutions can be developed. Training, as a solution, is most appropriate when a problem is caused by lack of understanding, information, or awareness. However, most problems with group effectiveness relate to direction, commitment, accountability and personal choice. They usually require active individual and group participation to change specific behaviors.

Resolving the problems of work groups that exist in every organization has a direct impact on productivity, quality, cycle-time and bottom-line profit. Addressing them effectively requires an understanding of underlying issues and processes that enable appropriate behavioral change.∞

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and mistrust. Contrariwise, those who act in a manner consistent with the strategy will build a culture of trust, understanding, and support.

Without confronting and effectively addressing misaligned leadership practices, the strategic intent will never be fully realized. For example, if leaders communicate a commitment to becoming a “learning organization,” and their practice is to reward risk-takers only if they are successful - punishing the unsuccessful through reduced merit pay, bonuses, demotions, etc. - it is highly unlikely that employees will take the risks that allow them to learn from their mistakes. How leaders manage themselves and pay/promotion practices in this regard will determine the success of a learning organization strategy.

Many HR professionals will attest that it can be a very daunting task to confront leaders, particularly executives, with the need to change their practices. Helping leaders connect effective practices with strategy requires that misaligned practices are identified (**Cognizance**), new and aligned behaviors are developed (**Competence**), and leaders are committed to the new ways of dealing with issues (**Cause**). Engaging leaders in processes to discover barriers to fulfilling organization strategy, helps to satisfy the cognizance and cause requirements for change. Furthermore, assisting leaders in developing meaningful alternative practices that ensure business success creates leadership competence that employees will recognize as leadership commitment to espoused strategic intent.∞

For information regarding processes for reconnecting leadership practices with organization strategy, contact us at 520-742-7300 or info@ascentmgt.com

Ascent Web Site

In case you missed the announcement, Ascent Management Consulting is now established on the internet as www.ascentmgt.com.

On the web site, you will find a useful Staff Role Profile created from your responses to a 12-question survey to help you know how to create HR, IS, and other staff support groups that have powerful bottom-line business impact. This survey is called The Current and Future Place of Staff Groups. Soon, we will be adding an organization values and practices survey to help you translate organization strategy into reality. It will provide you with specific actions for creating a successful distributed workplace.

The site also allows you to access articles written by Kevin Herring, and published in Workforce Magazine, that suggest a market-valued approach to HR responsibilities. Additionally, the always provocative Management In Real Life column (published

monthly in many SHRM chapter newsletters) is located on the home page and updated each month.

A description of consulting services, archives of the Tools & Techniques newsletter, and links to allied organizations are provided on the site.

Take a look and give us your feedback. We look forward to your visits!∞

Write To Us:

If you have questions or experiences you would like to share please feel free to contact us by email, “snail mail,” or telephone using the information provided in the box to the right. Some material may be used in feature articles or in Management In Real Life. Names of companies and individuals will be omitted or changed in the text of all material published. Occasionally we may publish responses to questions from our readers which we believe may be relevant to many businesses. In such cases, our policy of confidentiality will be effective as stated above.

The Iceberg Phenomenon

Many have experienced what has been referred to as the “iceberg phenomenon.” It describes what happens when only the tip, or small amount of apparent information relating to a problem, is observed and managed. The larger problem remains uncovered and ignored.

If we navigate ourselves in our personal decisions and behaviors according to what is immediately evident, we will miss what lies beneath the surface and constantly find ourselves disappointed.

This frequently occurs with supervisors and managers when handling employee problems. It is also a common cause of ineffective interpersonal relationships.

Probing deeper into issues through effective conversations, confidential interviews, and focus groups helps to identify the true nature of a problem and provide the data necessary for fully addressing it. This helps us to avoid trying to solve the perceived rather than the actual problem, and target solutions where they are most impactful.∞

Ascent Tools & Techniques is published by Ascent Management Consulting, a Tucson-based firm specializing in business results through the design of effective human engagement systems and tools. We can be reached at 520-742-7300, by fax at 520-742-9236, by mail at 330 E. Glenhurst Dr., Oro Valley, AZ 85704, or by email at:

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