

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

It seems that the phrase, “all for one and one for all” applies more to candy bars than employee commitment. A few months ago, I was returning home from a business trip and had a conversation on the plane with a most fascinating engineer. As we discussed some of the challenges facing his business, he revealed some frustrations with his company’s purchasing department. The story went something like this: A vendor was supplying inferior quality parts and the engineers asked buyers from the purchasing department for a new supplier. The buyers insisted that the prices charged by other suppliers were prohibitive. The engineers explained that the value of the time used in manipulating poor quality parts in order to get them to work was far greater than the price difference, but the purchasing staff were unwavering in their position. Soon thereafter, an employee from an interested department discussed the issue with a buyer. The buyer asked from whom the engineers wanted to purchase the parts. The response was, “ABC Corporation”. Upon hearing this, the buyer retorted, “Then we will buy from “XYZ.”

Now there’s a great example of a committed employee! This poor engineer who merely wanted to improve the manufacturing process, became caught in a power struggle about who would make the decision about selecting vendors. He expressed his dismay in his exclamations, “Can you believe that?” and “How could they do something like that?” When my conversation partner said, referring to the buyers, “They should be committed!” I wasn’t sure if he meant committed to the business or committed to some other kind of institution.

Clearly, those in the purchasing department see themselves as accountable only for the specific set of tasks or activities defined for those in purchasing. They elucidate their objective as managing the tasks of purchasing and for maintaining control over the process. They fail to see any connection between their work and the outcomes of the business, nor do they see themselves as being accountable for business objectives.

As appalling as this behavior may seem, it’s hardly a rarity. I hear similar stories in almost every organization with which I do business.

What is the answer to this perplexing problem, you ask? Consider a few simple principles that can help. The first three are: Educate, Educate, and Educate. Drawing from our purchasing example, the buyers in that company should become knowledgeable about the manufacturing processes, engineering concerns, and quality issues. They need to connect their expertise to the problems of those in manufacturing in order to truly help the business.

Four, stop holding people accountable for tasks. Yes, you heard right. And no, I’m not a communist. I’m not saying that people shouldn’t *be* accountable and that there aren’t consequences anymore. It’s just that we work so hard at making sure people perform the tasks we want them to that we essentially tell them that tasks are important, not outcomes. We also tend to emphasize task accountability for a work group or area as if each group is a separate entity working in isolation of the others. Instead of isolated tasks, wouldn’t we rather have everyone focused on making the entire organization succeed?

Five, create problem-solving collaborations. A problem with substandard parts should not be an engineer’s problem. It should be an organization’s problem shared by all in the business. My engineer

friend should be able to take this problem to buyers, quality assurance staff, those on the shop floor, and anyone else who can help to produce a solution to their shared problem.

So the next time you hear the Three Musketeers motto, “all for one and one for all,” put away your calorie chart and learn about business problems on which to collaborate, because the success of the whole depends on the unity of the parts.

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At Ascent we believe that organizations are only as successful as the systems that engage the individuals who work there. Ascent Management Consulting is committed to creating management, culture, organization, and governance systems that enable personal fulfillment and organization effectiveness.

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