

# Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

I invite you to take a walk with me for a moment into employment nirvana. You work in a plant that manufactures household food dehydrators. After a week on the job, it becomes apparent that in the plant there is no functional supervisor. Employees begin each day by taking a position on the assembly line and, without any guidance, appear to know where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do.

Although management conveys no production objectives for the day, everyone knows what the previous day's production was and all seem to be aware of the highest production levels achieved in the past. Often, at the beginning of the day an employee picks up a piece of chalk and writes a number on a large chalkboard at the front of the plant where a door leads into the main offices. The number represents a possible production goal for the day. Frequently, the number exceeds the previous day's production level. The person writing the number doesn't talk to anyone about it prior to writing it on the board, nor do workers discuss it much once it's written. Everyone just seems to accept it as representing a goal for the day and the group usually attains it. Interestingly, nobody receives any extra pay for the achievement, there are no company celebrations, and, in fact, nobody from management even appears to be aware of what has occurred that day.

As the product moves down the assembly line, you notice that bottlenecks occasionally occur. When this happens, employees elsewhere on the line jump in and help. Coworkers may offer to trade positions for a while. If employees become bored, fatigued, or begin to slow down, they tell a coworker and arrange to trade jobs.

More experienced employees offer to teach new employees how to perform various tasks on the line and provide coaching where needed. Within a short period of time, new employees are competent on most every job in the production process.

Sound strange, almost eerie? This was my experience in a summer job during my early years in college. There was clearly a culture that all felt a part of. How it initially came about, I don't know. But I do know that it had existed for some time and that this group of employees frequently achieved new daily production levels and consistently increased production each week. The environment turned jobs that many would consider to be mundane and tedious into bearable and even, at times, enjoyable activities as employees challenged themselves and one another with subtle invitations.

At the end of the summer, an interesting change occurred. A formal supervisor was hired and given a specific charge to improve productivity. Immediately, voluntary job rotation was stopped. Our new supervisor began each day by declaring what the day's production must be. It was usually close to double the highest level for a day's production and, to my knowledge, never attained. Workers were expected to keep pace with the line such that when bottlenecks occurred workers were forbidden to step in and help each other.

Suddenly our nirvana ended. Workers began to tire in certain jobs on the assembly line. Bottlenecks became increasingly frequent and severe. Line workers began to openly joke about the daily production quotas until the supervisor overheard the comments and declared that talking on the line would not be tolerated. Before long, production began to decrease significantly and the supervisor demanded more and more from production workers. Soon, terminations ensued and turnover rose substantially.

I suppose I could use this experience to illustrate the impact of organization culture on business results or the effect of management practices on culture. But, today I am going to challenge a common misperception about leadership - that strong and involved leadership is necessary to create a culture of

employee commitment that gets things done.

Our own experiences tell us that the more we are watched, held accountable, and “managed”, the more compliant and less committed we become, as evidenced in the food dehydrator affair. It follows then that the best leaders know when to set direction and when to get out of the way - a case for less equals more, where less hand-holding and control enables more commitment and results.

So lets stop kidding ourselves. The idea that employee morale and commitment is in the hands of management exists primarily in the minds of management. In reality, the decision to engage or not is always in the hands of the individual. Acknowledging this simple fact dramatically alters how we respond to the workforce and allows adults to be treated like adults. Fundamentally, isn't this where we all want to be?

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