

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The “People-Development” Side of Leadership

by Dr. Mike Armour

I heard someone say recently that his earliest business mentor told him, “Everything works great, until people are involved. Then it becomes a mess.”

Humor aside, there's an important element of truth in that generalization. The people side of leadership is often the messiest element of the job.

This is why I put so much emphasis in these newsletters on the leader's interpersonal and communication skills. Messes are going to happen, no matter what. But we don't need to invite needless ones by not engaging with our people so effectively that they, in turn, become fully engaged with the enterprise.

Talking about employee engagement a few weeks ago, one of my clients said, “The people who report to you are your greatest asset when things are going well. But if you let them become disillusioned or disengaged, they become your greatest liability when things start heading downhill.”

The irony is that when things are going well, we often don't see the need to devote much energy to keeping people engaged. On the other hand, when things start going to the proverbial hot place in a handbasket, it's often too late to engage them.

Losing Focus on Engaging Your People

In good times we lose focus on engagement for several reasons, but I want to focus on two in particular. First, when things are going well, there are so many promising opportunities to seize that it's hard to find time for “people-building” activity. That's okay, we tell ourselves, because morale appears to be high. People seem happy. Everything is rosy.

The first of this year two medium-size small businesses asked me to do considerable leadership team-building with them. Both companies had been growing rapidly, adding one new executive after another. As a consequence, all of this new blood had left the unity and shared vision of the leadership team somewhat frayed.

I was excited about the work with these companies, gave them a very competitive price, and made all of my preparations to start the moment that they were ready. Yet, here we are twelve months later and they've never started.

Oh, they had good intentions last January. And they were certainly sincere in saying that they wanted to capitalize on what I offer. The problem was, their business continued to mushroom. And they just never found time in the calendar for the sessions with me. We postponed month after month after month, until inaction finally killed the whole idea.

This type of scenario is more common than you might imagine. For the people-engagement side of your leadership to be a genuine priority, you have to devote more than lip-service and good intentions to it. You have to purposefully set aside time that would otherwise go to some really good thing — perhaps even some really profitable thing — to re-direct that time toward people-building and team engagement.

Misreading the Level of Employee Commitment

The second reason that we become lax about engagement-building in good times is a mistaken reading of the tea leaves. From what we are observing with our people, we conclude that they are engaged already. There's no need to focus on engagement.

What is too frequently the case, however, is that people are not engaged to the point that they are fully committed. They are merely going through the motions of complying with expectations. This distinction is not original with me. Peter Senge developed it at length two decades ago in his book *The Fifth Discipline*.

Senge created a seven-tier hierarchy to reflect different levels of employee engagement with the organization's vision. At the bottom of the tier he placed employees who are either apathetic or non-compliant. Above them he identified three levels of compliance: grudging compliance, formal compliance, and genuine compliance.

Those who are *formally* compliant do what is expected, but nothing more. Those who are *genuinely* compliant do more than what we expect of them. They are "good soldiers." We often say of such workers that they are engaged and fully committed.

But Senge argued that there is a tell-tale sign that they are merely compliant. Whatever they do, he noted, they assiduously stay within the letter of the law, never going beyond it.

He contrasts this to the workers whom he puts at levels six and seven. Those at level six he calls the "enrolled," those at level seven the "committed." People who are enrolled are so engaged with the vision that they will do whatever is called for to achieve it, acting (if need be) beyond the *letter* of the law so long as they can remain within the *spirit* of the law.

The ones who are committed go a step further. If some law, structure, or precedent is working against achievement of the vision, they set out to change it. They have a singular obsession: accomplishing the vision and letting neither rules, structure, nor precedent deter them from their task.

What Fully-Committed Employees Give You

I should hasten to add that Senge was not demeaning the fully compliant worker. Far from it. He recognizes, as I do, that businesses, non-profits, and causes flourish when they have a heavy concentration of compliant people.

But those who are fully committed and fully engaged give you something that the fully compliant person does not. They give your enterprise their best creativity, their best imagination, their innovative spirit. That's why you must be moving as many people as possible from fully compliant to enrolled or committed.

The best time for this to happen is when things are going well. Fully engaged people make their stellar contributions out of a sense of ownership. They think more like owners of the enterprise than like employees. Now, owners want to be proud of what they own. So getting people more engaged in good times has the reinforcing power of pride of ownership.

Does this imply that it's pointless to work on engaging people when things are going poorly? No, not at all. It's just more difficult to achieve your goal in that situation. But the people-side of leadership is never an option. It must be tended to daily, good times or ill.

Then, once you've upped the level of engagement of your people, you can face the prospect of bad times with greater equanimity. You will have the quiet assurance that your people will give you the same imagination and creativity in correcting the downslide that they gave you in accelerating the ascent. What leader could ask for more than that?

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