

Shane Yount, author of the soon to be released book *Buried Alive: Digging Out of the Management Dumpster*, sums it up well when he says “Leaders must provide habit, discipline and structure.” These three factors drive consistency and focus. These three factors are the hardest, most necessary work an HR leader can undertake.

Rather than continuing to contribute these unproductive behaviors that undermine the enterprise’s effectiveness, let’s work on creating a fully-stocked arsenal for dealing with these people. Before we

begin stocking the arsenal, it is worth mentioning the fact that there are two key concepts underlying this discussion.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST

The first concept is accountability. As HR leaders we are held accountable for establishing and maintaining the highest standards of excellence. We are accountable to the business units we support, to our staff and to the company that employs us. We are accountable for resources, from fiscal to human to technological. In turn, we owe it to

the staff to hold them accountable as well. There is nothing wrong with letting them feel a little heat. Yount, a principal in North Carolina-based Competitive Solutions, believes that each level of the organization should be help accountable for producing results. Additionally, staff has to understand the multiple demands placed on both their business unit and the enterprise. Those demands, coupled with the company’s strategic objectives, need to shape everyone’s output. We’re talking about creating intentional congruence between strategy and behavior to produce the desired outputs. That output will vary from one business unit to the next. In some the output is research, in others it is design and still in others it is production. Whatever the outputs, it is important that HR leaders assist business units in creating higher levels of accountability.

If accountability is the first key concept, trust is the second. I’m not talking about mushy, gushy, touchy, feely, let’s have a group hug stuff. I’m talking about bottom-line faith in you, the leader, your executive team, and ultimately the company, to do what is ethically right. Building and maintaining trust are a part of your obligation to the enterprise. Staff has to trust your personal integrity, trust your decision-making and ultimately your competence. By the same token, you have to trust staff to manage the company’s resources and reputation. Customers make their decisions about the company based on each staff interaction. We all know that it takes years to build trust but it can be destroyed in a millisecond.

Here is a prime example of quickly-eroded trust: a large, national trade association had been losing members to state affiliates, posting losses, laying off staff and expecting the remaining employees to fulfill the trite adage of “doing more with less.” The executive vice president held several all hands meetings to discuss the association’s precarious financial position. He committed to stop the hemorrhaging. He advised that several cost-saving and cost-containment strategies were in the works. The journal would be reduced to six issues a year instead of twelve. Dues were being raised, as were registration fees for events. He committed to



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no more layoffs unless it was absolutely necessary. He asked that people find ways to save in their areas as well. Because he had been a popular EVP, well-liked, well-respected and trusted, people got on board with the cost-saving initiatives. They agreed to give up their free coffee, tea and bottled water. They conserved paper and other supplies. They made better use of volunteers instead of hiring temps. These were clear signs of trust, respect and commitment to the association.

The association's annual meeting was upon them. Fewer staff were asked to go and man the various functions, though no fewer functions were held than in years past. But, being all for the team, they agreed. By sharp contrast, the EVP, board members and other executives were driven to all of the functions in limousines. They enjoyed several extravagant dinners that tallied up to thousands of dollars a pop. Their spouses also had drivers at their disposal throughout the entire annual meeting week. In its time of most dire fiscal straights, the association paid for all of this excess.

When everyone returned to the office the head of the meeting planning department was enraged. She, being both courageous and committed to the association, told the EVP of her disappointment with his hypocritical behavior. Unaccustomed to direct feedback, he fired her. Needless to say, when the story spread throughout the association's staff and membership, his credibility plummeted.

This blatant breach of trust betrayed everyone in the association. The moaning and groaning rose to deafening decibels. If line staff is asked to cut back, leaders have to model the same control. The talent exodus that followed was predictable. Robert Galford and Anne Seibold Drapeau aptly sum up the fall-out from egregious breaches of trust when they say "...if people trust their leaders, they will work harder and dig deeper than anyone has the right to ask." The reverse is also true. When people don't trust their leaders they disengage, however quietly. This is when employees focus on rumors, innuendo and eventually finding other career opportunities. The damage this breach of trust wrought in already trying times has been difficult, nearly impossible, to



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repair. The EVP is still in place but has had a series of setbacks with staff and the board.

SEVEN LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Recognizing trust and accountability as fundamental in dealing with all employees, not just the troublesome ones, what are the specific leadership strategies that align

individual behavior with acceptable norms? The practices revolve more around the leaders and less around the so-called problem employees. They help with the habit, discipline and structure, Yount advises. There are seven leadership strategies that foster both the accountability and trust addressed throughout this article:



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1. Tell the truth about performance, even when it hurts.
2. Give cease and desist orders when unproductive, destructive patterns emerge.
3. Engage in conflict in a manner that fosters resolution.
4. Reinforce desirable behavior with positive acknowledgement and rewards.
5. Hire based on attitudinal attributes as well as technical prowess.
6. Deliver clear, consistent messages regarding expectations.

7. Commit to growing people.

The first strategy, being candid about performance, is an essential first step. Employees need to know when they are excelling and when there is room for improvement. This sounds so basic, but in fact it presents challenges for even the most senior executives. For some reason, leaders have become inept at really coaching people for peak performance. I once served as guest lecturer in an executive development institute that drew senior managers from across the state. When this issue of providing

straight feedback came up, nine of the ten participants admitted that they do not regularly offer timely comments to their staff. A couple of the executives said that they assume their direct reports, who are also senior-level managers, know what is expected of them. They admitted frequent frustration when these managers fall short of these often unarticulated expectations.

The second strategy also revolves around performance. When patterns that are antithetical to fostering the company's strategic aims emerge, leaders have to quickly identify the dysfunction before it becomes habitual. Once patterns become set, they are more difficult to break; hence, the reason for spotting trouble early, before it becomes ingrained. A regional bank association had become accustomed to late, error-ridden reports from their compliance department. Executives ignored this behavior because mistakes were generally caught before final reports were issued. They also made excuses for this lackluster performance because of the accepted eccentricities of the compliance department and their leader. This is what Yount refers to as "institutionalized behavior." I am less kind; I call it institutionalized stupidity. Look at the patterns that are occurring. Do they make sense? Do they support the organization's objectives? If they do not, it is time to issue a clear cease and desist.

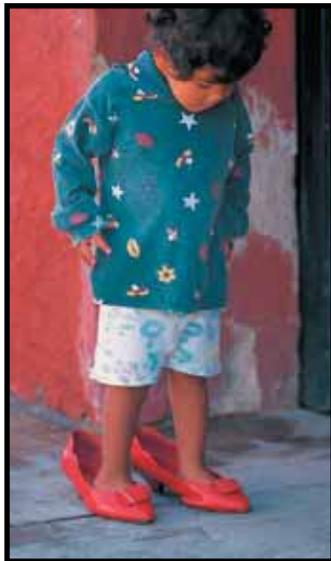
Conflict inherently creates a degree of discomfort. It is more difficult for some managers to deal with than others. But, it is unavoidable. You simply cannot run an organization, especially one that operates in today's economy, without a little conflict. HR leaders are well-served by applying sound conflict management strategies. Dudley Weeks, one of the country's leading authorities on conflict resolution, suggests four key steps for resolving issues:

1. Recognizing hidden perceptions of the conflict.
2. Identifying mutual needs in the relationship and the organization.
3. Stay future-focused, rather than pursuing blame.
4. Create action plans.

Weeks believes that, using a structured approach, leaders can move through

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conflicts while producing results for the organization. This is critical. Too much time is wasted on disagreements. Learn to use that energy not to further the disagreements, but to get to the common ground and produce outputs for the company.

Moving to the fourth leadership strategy, behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated. Use formal and informal rewards to keep people interested in their work and in reaching the goals of the enterprise. An informal reward can be as simple as a note saying thanks for the extra effort or a pizza for lunch. Whatever it is, it conveys a clear message of appreciation. When leaders set an appreciative tone, staff is more inclined to push harder and produce more. While many organizations have tried formal reward systems like Employee of the Month, Salesperson of the Year, I find that sincere, informal efforts are better-received. These efforts signal the fact that leaders are attentive and concerned.

Each new hire presents an opportunity to bring in the right skills, competencies, and equally as important, the right attitude. This fifth leadership strategy is the one I am most passionate about. Bringing in the right people is crucial to the long-term success of the company. Often we place too much emphasis on hiring for experience and technical expertise without considering whether the person can be customer-focused, outcome-driven and collaborative. Shifting to these considerations requires that you think seriously about the attitudinal factors essential for success. It also requires that you work closely with recruiters, whether internal or external, to be sure that they are screening for very specific attitudinal factors. Your recruiting model may need to be revised to use a team or panel approach. Consider including various simulations that will reveal more about applicant's attitudinal disposition. Present different case studies and ask them to respond. Conduct a short assessment designed around your service philosophy. There are any number of techniques that you can use to gather data on whether this is really the right person for the company.

Related not just to performance, but also to standards of ethics, behavior and overall accountability, the sixth strategy is

delivering clear, consistent messages regarding expectations. This involves using communication that really works. You have to be willing to make your expectations known at all levels of the organization. In fact, managers, not just the most senior ones, are responsible for making sure employees understand what is expected of them. It is also helpful to tie expectations to the strategic goals of the enterprise. These clear linkages create intentional alignment between performance, behavior and the organization's strategic intent. It is that

alignment that ultimately creates long-term organizational effectiveness.

Seventh and finally, commit to growing people. Building a staff of people who not only have above average capacity, but who actually use that capacity for the good of the enterprise, is the mandate of every leader. The more that people know about industry trends, corporate issues and their areas of expertise, the more valuable they are to the organization and the larger corporation.

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SUMMARY

A leader's work never, ever ends. Between the seemingly troublesome employees, the endless work, the relations with business units, customers and everyone else—is it any wonder exhaustion abounds? That difficult work is made a little easier when we turn our focus inward, realizing the limitless potential we possess to direct energy and effort in the company. That inward focus begins with holding ourselves and everyone else accountable. A higher level of accountability surely produces higher levels of productivity. Couple accountability with trust and you have a solid foundation for moving the company forward.

Once you have established these two crucial leadership competencies, it is much easier to use the seven strategies detailed herein. The strategies address everything from performance to conflict to staff development. As you implement the strategies, be sure that you work to help managers and supervisors use them as well. It is through this cascading effect that the culture of the association changes to reflect the habit, discipline and structure that Yount references. This leader-led culture change focuses energy not on the troublesome employees, but instead on refining the ability to establish real, measurable standards for running the business. According to Yount, it is this shift that will drive the consistency and focus crucial for enduring success. ■

About the Author: *Joanne L. Smikle moves minds! Reach this author, consultant and speaker at www.smiklespeaks.com or 301-596-2822.*

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