



Why Can't They Get Along?

Guiding employees toward a collaborative effort

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Perhaps your salespeople are complaining about your service technicians. They say they're "techno-geeks," have no personality and alienate customers. The worst grievance the sales staff levies is that the technicians pass up sales and routinely ignore leads.

But these gripes are not a one-way street. The service guys have just as long a litany of complaints, and they are no kinder. They say the salespeople only think about selling — they don't understand any other parts of the business. They don't know the products or the equipment and make ludicrous promises.

And, if that is not enough, the administrative staff grumbles about everyone in the dealership. The managers do not respect the back-office people. The salespeople put unreasonable demands on the accounting and administrative people. And the technicians are just out to lunch, literally as well as figuratively. So, what's the secret to getting these folks to work together?

Well, there really is no secret. As an owner or senior manager, you have to get comfortable with some conflict because it's inevitable. This storming is one of the stages that teams and work-groups naturally go through before they reach a level of high performance. Your job is to move them beyond the complaining to more productive activities. Part of that movement will require you to establish different norms of behavior so that relationships can evolve and get stronger. As people get to know and appreciate each other's skills, talents and responsibilities, they are less inclined to gripe about slights and mistakes.

The trick is to create partnerships that enable people to work together. These partnerships will change the nature of work in the dealership, reducing turf and territory disputes. They will also help form a different organizational culture, one that is characterized by collaboration, effective communication and cooperation.

Keys to Collaboration

There are five keys to collaboration. As you review each, think about how you could apply it in your workplace. These are not theoretical



ideals. They are practical techniques that can be implemented in almost any dealership.

Build interdependence

The key is to get people to link their talents for the betterment of the enterprise. This requires you, the leader, to keep everyone in the loop on the organization's long-term strategy and short-term operational goals. It also requires departments to have regular discussions about their struggles and successes.

Here's an example of interdependence in action. A dealership decides that it will institute a referral bonus program for service technicians. They are encouraged to look for opportunities for the sale of different products and/or services to existing customers. In each case, the technician refers the customer to the sales representative in that territory. This incentive makes the service technicians think broader than service. It encourages them to communicate with the customer about their growth and equipment needs. And, more important, it builds a partnership between the sales and service departments.

Create alignment

People, processes, products, services and systems have to be aligned with the company's mission and strategy. This is a relatively simple concept, but it escapes a lot of managers. If you espouse customer service and have complex processes for dispute resolution, you are misaligned. If you tout the benefits of technology, but use an antiquated telephone system that is ill equipped to handle your current call volume, you are misaligned. If your organization is on a growth track, but your salespeople don't have incentives and goals that require them to reach hard and far, you are misaligned.

Detecting areas of misalignment requires that you stop and take stock of the enterprise. Successful organizations may miss opportunities for even greater success by being unwilling to allow time for reflection and thoughtful planning. Consider conducting interviews, focus groups or some other type of assessment to determine where and how you have missed the mark on alignment.

Focus on solutions

Anyone, well almost anyone, can spot a problem. Getting to workable solutions takes far more skill. Encourage people throughout your organization to come up with solutions to the large and small problems that plague the dealership. By diverting energy from the moans and groans, you are actually creating opportunities for growth. When leaders engage people in the process of finding ways to improve the company, raise levels of productivity and spur revenue growth, they are directing energy into areas that make a substantive difference. This redirected energy gives the organization bench strength. It also instills confidence in everyone involved in solution-generation processes.

Attention devoted to figuring out how to make the operation maximally effective trickles down throughout the company. The same is true of a problem-focus. That negative energy can contaminate the entire organization.

Encourage dialogue

Get people talking about whatever is going on in their part of the dealership. Get people to share their struggles, successes and failures. This starts at the leadership level. Begin modeling this behavior by talking with people about various facets of the organization, the industry and other related topics. Once you are comfortable talking and listening, get managers in on the act. Instead of meeting with department heads separately, pull them all together to discuss business issues.

One dealer decided that he could easily build dialogue by making it a point to eat in the lunchroom at least once a week. This enables him to hear the concerns of a broad range of employees. It also makes him more approachable. His company's culture had never, in its 40-year history, been one where the owner maintained a high degree of contact with the rank and file. His efforts to reduce stratification were first met with skepticism. But, after a while, employees sensed his sincerity and began talking with him about their work.

Remember, it's a process, not an event

Getting people to work together is an ongoing process that requires a commitment to organizational and individual development. It is not as simple as holding training classes or having retreats. Instead, it requires a long-term commitment to developing seemingly disparate talents, balancing competing interests and warding off skirmishes.

The process begins with the formulation of goals and objectives. This enables everyone to have clarity about where the company is moving and how collaborative work enhances its ability to reach those goals. The next step is the stormy phase I alluded to earlier. It is natural that people with varied interests, ideas and experiences will have some degree of difficulty getting to the common ground. Managing this conflict is, perhaps, the most difficult job any leader faces. Once the storm has passed, everyone can move to collaborating. This may include creating cross-functional teams, offering formal and informal opportuni-

ties for discussion or instituting cross-training programs. Whatever collaborative processes you institute, they need to closely link to the overall objectives of the enterprise.

It's a Process

When it appears that whining and complaining have become the official language of your dealership, when departments seem more like battalions armed to defeat the enemy within, and when everyone has lost sight of the fact that you are one company working to achieve common goals — it's time to embark on a charted course to collaboration. That course includes creating a culture that relies on interdependence, dialogue and a clear focus on solutions. Remember, all of this is a process, not an event. It will take time, patience and a commitment to the long haul. ■

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