

Activate your people to succeed

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In a recent broadcast on business channel CNBC, the leader of a major flight attendant's union discussed the financial plight of her members' employer, a well-known airline. Throughout the interview she consistently referred to her union as "we" and the airline as "they." The hostility between employer and employee came through loud and clear. Plainly, management did not have everyone pulling on the oars toward the same finish line. In point of fact, the management of that nearly defunct airline has failed to manage.

Understand this important point. People, by nature, resist being managed. They are not like machines that are set up, tested and produce consistently for hours, even years. On the other hand, you cannot motivate a machine to go beyond the call of duty, make one plus one equal three. Only people can accomplish that.

The key to extraordinary achievement is what famed management consultant Marvin Bower called *activating* people – getting them to cut loose and excel. Don't forget that you, as a manager, create performance and reach your objectives only through the actions of your people.

Bower notes that there are eight principle means to get people going:

Orders – Commanding another to take action.

Penalties – Threatening or imposing punishment for poor performance.

Advice – Suggesting, rather than ordering, a specific course of action.

Constructive job attitudes – Providing freedom to act, opportunity to advance and a sense of achievement.

Rewards – Paying for achieving target results with money and/or advancement.

Personal commitment – Stimulating interest in the job and company.

Self-government – Creating a small-unit environment where effort is connected directly to success.

Leadership – Inspiring effort and sacrifice.

The first seven of Bower's methods form a continuum ranging from strict command-and-control (orders) to empowerment (self-government). But one element is common to all – a requirement for communication. No matter which approach is chosen, you must articulate the message to your audience.

Getting that communication right requires some thought. Here are twelve principles to follow:

Develop the message. A key role of managers is to define, first, what the company is aiming to achieve, and second, how those objectives generally will be achieved. That message should have three essential parts:

What the objectives are.

What your people have to do.

How your people benefit.

Sell the message. Every employee deserves to hear your company's goals and how they can contribute. Yet it goes beyond that. Employees must "buy" your message just like your customers buy your product. That step takes what management guru Adrian Slywotzky calls *internal marketing*. Your customers don't buy your products or services simply because you offer them. It's no different for your employees, your "internal customers." You must deliver a convincing argument that entices them to act.

Don't just talk. Don't confuse talking with communicating. Talking is a one-way street. Communicating involves asking questions, listening and thinking about your employees' responses. Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton offered this sage advice, "Listen to everyone in your company and figure out ways to get them talking." Start with focus groups and employee satisfaction surveys. In meetings, share the podium with your employees. Use regular walks through the plant to ask questions. Conduct "stay" interviews to find out why people remain at your company.

Take your message to everyone. The U.S. Marine Corps is one of the most motivated, successful organizations in the world. Marines believe that the outcome of any operation may rest with the lowest ranks and their ability to make the right decision. Privates and corporals are constantly reminded that their performance doesn't just contribute to the bottom line, it is the bottom line.

Give people the objective, not how to achieve it. Troops in World War II practiced endlessly for the D-Day invasion. Planning for the attack was extensive and detailed. Yet General Eisenhower knew that when his soldiers hit the beaches, the best planning and clearest orders would go for naught. On the eve of the attack Ike issued a brief, eloquent message reminding his men of their prime objective. He relied on them to take the line of least resistance to reach that objective.

Get news out fast. Employees can sense when change is in the air. When big decisions that affect your people are concluded, stop the rumor mill short. Make a commitment to tell your people the implications of those decisions. Doing so will make them feel like part of the team.

Repeat the message. Managers often believe that communicating is

a one-time task. However, the most serious failures in any organization are created by the gap between what you say to do and what gets done. Even the clearest directive can be misunderstood. Often you must clarify the message. And always you must say your message over and over again. Dog trainers tell you that hounds

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require hundreds of repetitions to learn a message. People, like dogs, require time and repetition to absorb new ideas. Understanding even the simplest concept, getting real buy-in, does not happen overnight.

Pick your media carefully. If you regard a message as important, communicate it seriously. Don't rely on emails or memos or, worse yet, a bulletin board to get your message heard.

Consider the feedback. Once you get your people talking, be prepared to act on their feedback. Be open to your people's thinking. Employees whose ideas and comments are not respected may not come back again with suggestions that are good for your company.

Conduct exit interviews. Sitting down with departing employees should be a standard operating procedure. Often, people leave for reasons other than money. In those cases, learning those reasons can spawn changes that reduce turnover.

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Say thank you. Pay and benefits are not enough. It takes appreciation and recognition to develop the pride and enthusiasm you need to be a top-notch organization. Communal acknowledgment of a job well done must be a regular part of your company's culture.

Spare the rod. Celebrate success and be careful with criticism. Don't put your people down. Often their failure traces back to your inability to communicate. Take a mistake as an opportunity to improve yourself and your people.

Bottom line: Achieving consistent, solid performance in any organization requires employees who manage themselves and have maximum *esprit de corps*. Creating these attributes in your company is one of your primary jobs as a manager. Don't just rely on the chain of command to ensure that the right decisions are made and company pride is high. Communicate, communicate, communicate. ▲