

Part Two

Rejuvenating Life at Work:

By Michael P. Boyes

In last month's issue I urged leaders to embrace their responsibility to build prosperous workplaces. "In our work we can experience personal poverty, also known as: frustration, boredom, rejection and isolation. Or we can experience personal fulfillment, also known as: productivity, value, self-expression and personal relationships...Owners and managers have a special responsibility to themselves and others to create abundance for the people around them."

Three ways leaders can do this are by:

- Hiring positive performers,
- Creating a productive climate, and
- Building high performance teams.

Creating a Positive Work Climate

You probably have some strong memories of work projects completed awhile ago. Pick one and think about it for a few seconds. Now, how would you react to the prospect of reliving that experience? Whether you shuddered or smiled at the idea tells a lot about the climate you experienced.

The contrasting climates of different workplaces can be surprising. Here are some ways people may describe your workplace:

- Boring vs. stimulating
- Harsh vs. supportive
- Predictable vs. challenging
- Competitive vs. collaborative
- Intimidating vs. welcoming

Most people prefer work climates characterized as stimulating, supportive, challenging and welcoming, and are most productive in that type of climate. Most managers I've met understand that. If that is true, then most companies should be operating at peak capacity all the time. Not exactly, but many do have the potential to be much more productive.

Any leader can create a positive, productive work climate whether he leads a team of three or a company of thousands. That's the good news. The other news is that it requires a lot of work. It starts with the hardest kind of work—personal growth.

In *The Heart of Virtue*, Donald Demarco says, "It is not possible to improve either our personal lives or our society apart from acquiring virtue..."

But we often take these virtues for granted even when we have done nothing to understand, acquire or develop them. Trying to become virtuous merely by excluding vice, however, is as unrealistic as trying to cultivate roses solely by eliminating weeds." The best leaders cultivate their own character and their environments to be marked with T.R.U.S.T.

T.R.U.S.T.

Trust is the central issue in all relationships and all environments. However,



Productive Work Climates

a lot of leaders look at this issue backwards. They are plagued with concern that their people are not trustworthy. They believe that their employees lack the requisite integrity, competence or both. Rather than worrying about others, leaders should focus first on their own character.

Trustworthiness

The first issue of trust in leadership is the call to develop strong personal character. Leaders are paid to submit their personal goals to the corporate interests. To achieve corporate goals, leaders mediate countless conflicting interests of team members, peers and superiors. The pressure of their responsibility and the confusion of agendas cause leaders to stumble occasionally.

The stumblings of a leader can be small or large, but they are all public. I recall a leader who amidst the announcements of lay-offs in his division, disappeared from view of his employees. The rumor spread that he was at corporate headquarters politicking to protect his position. His credibility and effectiveness were lost forever. This man did not adhere to three cardinal rules of leadership integrity:

1. Dedicate yourself to causes that are greater than your personal interests.
2. Commit yourself to the success of your people.
3. Publicly communicate your values and standards so others understand and properly interpret your actions.

Trusting

One element of a strong character is to be trusting. An honest look at life produces this somewhat scary fact: we are all dependent on each other. Most of us can't produce our own food, fix our own cars, or build our own houses. Similarly, leaders can't do all the work. Nor should they be directly involved in the work of their team. Rather, they must equip people and trust them to produce. Few of us possess 100 percent of the talents needed to excel in our own jobs, much less the work of our units. Faced with that dilemma, we can choose to:

- conceal our inadequacies,
- become parasitic and depend on others for survival, or

- embrace interdependence, wherein we trust in others and they in us to meet each other's needs.

Our ingrained mindsets are barriers to interdependence. Leaders often mistakenly believe that their competence and influence lie in their expertise or personal superiority. Consequently, they spend a lot of energy building-up themselves and protecting their images. All the while they deny others the opportunity to demonstrate their talents, thereby deflating motivation.

Another barrier is egocentricity. As a rule, people trust themselves more than others. I grimaced as a client told me how busy he was standardizing the



supplies and organizing his fleet of vehicles. There was a problem. Too often repairs couldn't be completed on the first trip because the vans were in disarray. But should the business owner spend his evenings organizing vans? No, but he trusted his skills more than his team's. As a result, he missed some key motivational opportunities:

- To add variety to the servicemen's jobs,
- To communicate accountability,
- To allow servicemen the dignity to solve a problem they "created,"
- To give the servicemen the opportunity to solve a significant productivity problem, and
- To show the servicemen that he regards them as capable, responsible men.

Relationship

Trust involves risk, which we try to minimize by "letting" people earn it bit-by-bit. This gradual release produces gradual rewards. It can also backfire by making people feel as though they are on short leashes, and by communicating low regard for them. Another approach is to give trust away by the bucketful. Heaping buckets of trust are received as: personal affirmation, an expression of your expectations, and an invitation to build a relationship.

Wonderful things happen when you give trust away: people start liking you, trusting you, and wanting to live-up to your expectations. They also start liking and believing in themselves more. Trust

given is trust earned because it builds a bond between people and frees them to be open with each other.

The bonds you establish through trust given will be tested. No matter which strategy you use, bit-by-bit or bucket-by-bucket, be sure of this: People will let you down, and you will let them down as well. That is why grace is needed.

Several years ago I arrived for an appointment without a piece of the business plan I was to present in the meeting. The lapse clearly disturbed me, but my mentor, whom I had just met, was not fazed by my mistake. Instead, he used the moment to establish the climate for our relationship. He said, "Listen, it is all right. If I can't give you the grace to make a mistake, what kind of relationship will

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we have? How would we work together? I'll need grace from you for bigger things than this." Grace in the workplace relationship liberates people to learn, to take initiative and to be innovative.

Understanding

Each of us is different; everybody knows that. So what? So people need a place to contribute in significant ways by using their personal talents and to feel valued for it. Understanding means to have insight into ourselves and others. Leaders must use their understanding to shape a climate where everyone feels and is significant. The chances are good that your team has some people like you and some who are not. The odds are also good that you have had some difficulty working with people whose work style differs from yours.

When you look at it honestly though, it becomes apparent that "problem" employees have important talents. You will also see that those talents stem from their basic personality, which can't be changed. Since you can't change a

person's style preferences, it makes sense to learn how to work together. Here are three recommendations for getting started:

1. Watch how a person does his/her job. People work in a style that is most comfortable to them. Pay attention to how they work with you and mimic that style when working with them. If they like to talk through technical problems in order to solve them, don't ask them for a written report. Instead, ask them to join you in a problem solving discussion.
2. Ask people how they prefer to handle their work. They will tell you if you show interest.
3. Hire a professional to facilitate a team building session to help your team understand how to work together better.

Standards

Trusting, open climates are liberating, and people will respond energetically. But without significant accomplishments, people become frustrated, hopeless, cynical and wander-off. A workplace



cannot be positive without being productive. The drive for personal accomplishment is visible even in toddlers. Have you seen the wide smiles children get when they take their first steps? About a year later toddlers insist, "I do, I do." Believe it or not, teenagers and your most slothful employees still enjoy their accomplishments.

Leaders can channel this drive by setting clear values and performance standards. Don't mistake announcing your standards with setting them. When you announce your standards, people may hear you and some will even listen. But they may not settle down deep in your people. Setting values and standards is little like setting support posts in concrete. The posts are your standards and the concrete is the set of values that anchors them.

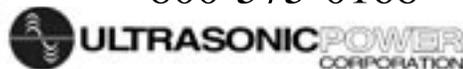
It is popular for organizations to advertise their mission and values, and that is a good thing if they adhere to them. In *True Professionalism*, David Maister makes this observation. "Many firms misunderstand that their values and standards are not defined by their aspirations, but by what they are prepared to enforce." Accountability hardens the values you set and strengthens your standards. Unless leaders find the courage to enforce accountability, their people and the company will not achieve excellence. When an employee is confronted with his own sub-standard performance,

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he becomes convinced that adequate is not good enough. Until that moment, the leader's fear of conflict, need for harmony or comfort with the status quo is more important than his espoused values.

Many times a simple feedback discussion is sufficient to spur a person on to excellence. Other times, the consequences must be more severe. But don't ever be harsh or offensive. Feedback discussions are best conducted as joint problem-solving exercises in which the leader frames the problem.

The discussion may start like this: "I've noticed a trend in your work over the last several months. Your customers are pleased with how you treat them on a personal level, but complain that jobs are not completed on time. Our goal is to complete all jobs on time. What can we do to make sure your jobs are completed according to schedule 100 percent of the time?"

When feedback is not enough, tougher consequences come into play. The discussion may start like: "We had several discussions about completing jobs on time, and I am concerned that you haven't shown much improvement. Starting next week, I will not approve any overtime for you or the workers on your team."

Tempo

Tempo begins with high standards and the belief that they can be met. Mediocrity is not inspirational. Leaders can create tempo by holding people to challenging, but achievable goals, and by making successes visible to their team.

Accountability for meeting standards works only when all team members adhere to them. Leaders operate in relative isolation and must work to keep themselves in check. The best way to do that is to invite your team and trusted colleagues to hold you to your standards. Leaders who graciously accept and act on feedback will find their teammates respond the same way.

Parents learn what it means to be a role model the first time their child blurts out something embarrassing in public. Everyone knows where the child learned it. Leaders are role models in business, and it would do them good to have similar learning experiences. I once had such a jolting experience a few years ago while trying to hold my support

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staff to deadlines. I was very frustrated when they (infrequently) missed my deadlines. At the same time, I regularly let them down on my commitments. When I confessed my double standard to them and committed to improve, I found that their reliability improved close to 100 percent.

Businesses sometimes flounder because they lose their sense of importance. Business plans gather dust or are reduced to routine when the importance of work is lost. In part, this happens because normal people can't maintain a high state of urgency indefinitely. Another reason it happens is that leaders permit people think they have dreary, meaningless jobs.

In business, leaders unwittingly conceal the meaning of work by giving people small jobs and by hiding their impact on customers. There is great significance in knowing "I make buildings safe and comfortable" versus believing "I clean carpets for a living." There is personal reward in knowing "that I help people solve business problems" versus believing "I deal with complaining customers." Leaders can create a positive tempo in their companies by showing people the meaning and importance of their work.

First line supervisors are the most powerful influences on employees' attitudes and productivity. Even when the world seems out of control, leaders can create rewarding workplaces and build successful businesses. A group of competent employees and a "trusting" work environment provide your business with a solid foundation of success. In next month's issue, we will look at turning a group of competent workers into a high performing team that is committed your company's success.

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