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The moral of this story is morale

By Paperitalo Staff

I happened to be in an institution the other day, in their lobby, and saw one of those funky displays, the one that starts out with a headline at the top that says; "Our core values." Beneath that in full 3-D glory, not just a picture or artist's rendering, was what looked like a mimic of the front of the Parthenon (but all columns complete) with written on the columns: "Integrity, Excellence, blah, blah, blah." Once again, some management consultant made a nice fee trying to motivate the working class to do what any competent management team should be able to do by themselves.

Our industry is rife with this same management problem. To me, it seems as some of the managers in our companies want to follow the old adage, "do what I say, not what I do." This leads to terrible morale problems, and great difficulty in managing.

The classic definition of management is "the allocation of scarce resources." Some subordinates think it is management's job to keep them happy--this is incorrect. Management's job is to keep them motivated. Sometimes this involves fear, sometimes rewards. Skilled managers know when and for how long to apply the proper techniques (a corollary--apply fear for too long and it will become ineffective, people will either become inoculated against it or will flee).

One thing that certainly does not help is for managers to think they can consistently fool the subordinate employees with nonsense. We have an epidemic of this going on in our industry, if one looks at the emails we get and the responses people provide to our surveys.

A sampling:

A couple of weeks ago, we asked, for a yes or no reaction to the statement, "I believe, in the long term, cellulosic biofuels will be a sustainable, subsidy-free business." 68% of the respondents

said, "No." Now, one can be picky and say this was a non-scientific survey, but while I would agree I would also argue that (a) the volume of responses was high, indicating a lot of passion on the subject and (b) what we are quibbling about is the number, talk yourself down from 68% for statistical purity and you will still have a large percentage of people that think this will not work.

This past week, when we asked, "Do you believe government subsidies help the pulp and paper industry?" 95% of respondents, again, of a fairly high volume response, said, "No." We allowed free form written responses to this question. One said, "I was very upset that our company did not use the windfall black liquor credits for reinvestment in something that would make a difference, and I'm glad that at least the Canadian system required this."

I could go on and on, both with samplings from our weekly surveys and from our 2nd Tuesday surveys. Bottom line, managers, you may think you have the right or you may think your subordinates are too stupid to figure out what you are doing, but you are wrong on both counts. You may think this makes no difference in the long term, or that you can hire some management consultant to come in and build a set of columns for your lobby, but, again, you are wrong.

In one major company in our industry, the employees near universally refer to the employer as "the evil empire." Think morale is high there?

What difference does all this make? There are short term and long term problems from systemic demoralization of your employees, problems which no management consultant can plaster over.

In the short term, demoralized employees will approach their work in a slovenly manner, affecting schedule and quality of their performance. Completely demoralized, they will steal from you or accept graft from less than highest quality suppliers seeking to do business with you. In the long term, they will change jobs, leave your employment, when the opportunity presents itself.

Leadership starts with managing morale. Managing morale starts with looking in the mirror at your own behavior, senior managers. The mirror is inanimate and can do little to harm you, but your subordinates see the same things, and can cause you unnecessary trouble.

All of these matters are costly. Some can be fixed with better communications of company actions. Others require changes in behavior. Ignoring the problem or putting columns in your lobby are not solutions.

These kinds of problems affect donations to the old alma mater, too. Look at the two examples shown above. Do you think alums are going to generously give to programs taking actions opposite of their beliefs? Not likely.

Sometimes when our morale is down, so is our safety awareness. Learn to decouple these two and you'll live, injury free, to a happier day!

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##