The Door is Always Open...Or is It?

Are you as approachable as you claim to be?   BY BRIAN RAY

When it comes to engaging employees, many managers and executives have forgotten the importance of simply listening and cultivating interpersonal relationships. It's ironic when you consider how many companies have their walls decorated with inspirational statements regarding how upstanding their values are, that their employees matter and encouraging communication.

While managers boast about having an open-door policy when it comes to issue resolution and listening to new ideas, in many cases, this exists only on a superficial level. Many of today's so-called empowering programs are merely an exercise of smoke and mirrors to make the working environment appear better than it actually is.

Regardless of the industry, anyone who has ever worked in a corporate environment can cite examples where a manager or other leader has been utterly unapproachable due to a myriad of reasons. These can include the manager's inflated ego, lack of empathy or even a lack of awareness. If employees don't find their managers approachable,

According to a recent Gallup poll of over one million U.S. workers, the number one reason they have left jobs is because of a bad supervisor and the resulting negative work environment.

then it doesn't matter how open a company policy claims to be, because the people it is designed to help just won't utilize it.

The Ongoing Denial

Remedying this type of workplace situation can be extremely difficult, as it forces the need to address and correct the very dynamic that permeates the atmosphere and requires a high level of determination and strength of character.

The first step is to confront leadership on their denial that a problem actually exists. Without that action, any subsequent attempt at honest communication becomes nothing more than an exercise in futility. A manager's denial is just another manifestation of the collective corporate ego that is common among the upper levels of leadership who simply refuse to believe that there is anything wrong with how they or any of their peers behave. Subconsciously, many of them feel that being a manager, leader or executive automatically gives them free reign to act in whatever manner they want. That kind of mindset only perpetuates the problem.

The Ever-Present Hypocrisy

Another major component is the hypocritical scenario that is generated on a daily basis within the workplace. Employees receive memos with corporate policies that encourage open communication without fear of repercussion, yet they know from experience that this is not the case, and the policy is really only an illusion. This then brings the collective sense to the workforce that leadership is completely out of touch with the reality of the situation (which of course, they are), hence the hypocrisy. This further damages the confidence that the workforce has in their leadership.

The Cost of Silence

Failure to report problems in the workplace and pursue corrective actions can lead to a vast array of repercussions for a company. These can include poor employee performance due to the constant stress of unresolved issues, and fearfulness to even mention, let alone address, problems. When the strain of unresolved problems combines with a tense working environment, employees can reach their breaking point and resign, causing the company to suffer the loss of talented staff members. This is certainly not an effective or productive business environment.

Moving Forward

There is the old saying, "Actions have consequences." But the reality is, a lack of action also has consequences. Corporate leadership needs to realize that they must back up their words and policies with deeds, and actually walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

So are you as approachable as you claim to be? Effective leaders must be prepared to deal with the truth of the situations that arise, and not brush the problems aside or deny their existence, especially if they are unpleasant. Any attempt to address workplace issues must include honest input from employees as to why they feel a manager is unapproachable. This can start the process for achieving effective resolutions and a deeper understanding for everyone involved. ✪

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