

Building a Winning Employee Team

By: Bernard Liebowitz, PhD

Do you believe in employees working together as a team?
Do you believe that the work your team puts out should be quality work?
Do you want your employees to take the initiative when problems arise at the work site?
And, do you want your employees to work hard and efficiently?

It would be hard to find an employer who would answer "no" to any of these questions. Now, let's look at what is actually happening.

Who among your readers is satisfied with the productivity of your employees and doesn't care whether they are more productive than they are now?

Who is pleased with how well your employees work together as a team: helping each other, making up for mistakes fellow employees make, etc.?

It would be equally hard to find employers who could answer "yes" to these questions! Have you thought why, despite your wanting efficiency, productivity and quality from your employees, you get teased — sometimes your employees do well and then the very next day they unexpectedly make some avoidable error or do something wrong that they knew should not have been done? Isn't that frustrating and discouraging?

Here you think you have hired the best people available, you pay them well and sometimes even better than your competition, you give them superior training ... and yet...!!

And, what do you do when these things happen?

Usually, its one of two things. Most owners, when they are faced with employees not living up to their standards, "point the bony finger": you fire them, get angry at them, make them redo their job, dock their pay, etc. This usually doesn't work in that the problems come back to haunt you. Also, the attitude this causes in your workers shows up when they are out on a customer call where you are not around. The customers are the butt of their resentment at your behavior, which makes you all the more angry.

The second thing many owners do is to do the job themselves because they feel that unless they, the owners, do it, it will never get done right.

Why does it happen that employees don't live up to your standards?

There are many different reasons people usually give, including the idea that workers today are not the same as they used to be, they aren't motivated like they had been once before, they are more spoiled than ever, etc. You feel you have to cater to them, be their nursemaid and father figure rolled up into one.

However, I think that the one main underlying reason for employees not being productive and not living up to your standards is that they are not functioning as a team, a winning employee team.

Let's contrast what happens in three different situations: where employees can "break" a business, where they just "maintain" a business, and where they function as a winning employee team.

A business that is being undermined from within has employees who drag their heels, make deliberate mistakes or omissions and couldn't care less about them, have loyalty only to their paycheck, are sloppy if not downright hostile with customers, don't care about their co-workers, steal and lie, and cost a great deal of money to have around. I am sure you can think of other characteristics. At least in this business that is being undermined from within, you as owner can see what is going on and in most cases can take some action before you go under.

However, a more pernicious situation just because it is not as obvious and does not allow for clear-cut answers is the one where employees just "maintain" the business. In this situation employees do what they are told and nothing more, don't make decisions and in fact wait around until someone else does it for them, don't offer new or creative ideas, resist change with all the "logical" excuses in the world, blame others for their mistakes. Their loyalty is to the job, not to the firm. They resist changes that might help the firm because the changes mean they have to work harder, learn new ways, interact with others differently, etc.

The winning employee teams couldn't be more different. Here employees solve problems even before the owner hears about them. The owner doesn't have to check and recheck work in progress or finished. Employee loyalty is to the firm because they know that translates into better working conditions. They accept and welcome change and new ideas. They become a firm's "sales force" and biggest booster, which makes customers feel they have made a wise decision in engaging the firm. Employees are more efficient and in fact look for ways of becoming more efficient. They help bring new employees along faster. They help each other so that the friction between different departments of many other businesses is absent here. And, they make more money for the business owner in many different ways: through increased productivity and efficiency, less absenteeism and lateness, fewer accidents, less turnover, among other cost effective ways.

The teams we are talking about include any grouping within a business that work together either for a brief or extended period of time. And, teams can be created out of individuals who are in the same department but who may have little contact with each other (e.g., installers who work either individually or with only one other person).

1. How Do You Build Winning Employee Teams?

There are seven major keys.

Continual Feedback to Employees

This key has to be turned first before any other. It is the basis of successful employee teams. The more your employees know about your business:

- The less they have to guess
- The more they feel part of the team

- The more influential and respected they feel
- The more they want to do a good job
- The more they feel you have an interest in their welfare
- And, consequently, the more identified they are with you and the business. The kinds of information we are talking about include:
 - Your goals, strategy, plans for the future
 - The financials of your business, especially pertaining to costs and margins (how else do employees know whether their work is contributing to the success of the firm?)
 - How you see and evaluate each employee, especially when coordinated with suggestions and training opportunities to improve
 - The customer feedback you get, both positive and negative
 - What suppliers and vendors are saying about the industry, your competitors, new products and services, etc.
 - Benchmarking, i.e., how others do the same work

Notice how each item above is precisely the kind of information you as owner need. In providing the same information to employees, you are aiding them in identifying with you as owner.

How Employees See You and the Firm

There is always a discrepancy between how we see ourselves and how others see us. The same holds for how you as owner sees your firm and how you have designed it, and, how others, especially your employees, see it. We all need a mirror in order to reduce this discrepancy. The owner's mirror needs to focus on the owner's management style and how it affects employee behavior and attitude, among other items of information.

The best way of obtaining this data is through periodic employee surveys and having outside consultants interview key employees, all under the blanket of confidentiality and anonymity. Not only should you as owner be privy to the data, but the reports should be made available to all employees, along with what steps you will be taking to correct whatever problems exist.

Future Goals and Plans

The first key above referred to the sharing of information about goals and plans. But unless employees have input and impact on these goals, they will remain nothing but dreams. Your employees can make your dreams come true. A way of doing this is to first develop a strategic plan with your management team. Cascade the plan down through each department so that employees can suggest changes, point out errors, etc., and develop tentative goals for their departments based on the overall plan. The plan then is recycled back up to the management team to consider the suggestions and emend the plan, back down to the departments, etc., until a plan results with which everyone can agree. Though this sounds intricate and difficult to organize particularly with large firms, allow me to assure you that it can be done effectively. With smaller firms some of the recycled steps can be collapsed.

The end result is a set of goals, action programs, and measurements of progress for the firm as a whole, the different departments and the individual employees.

Team Problem Solving

Ownership has to ask itself whether it really thinks employees are potentially capable of solving problems. Some owners don't feel this way. They see workers as nothing more than hired hands, and, in fact, that's exactly what they get, hired hands who purposely go brain-dead at work.

However, if ownership does believe in workers' abilities, then the message has to be communicated that the team is expected to solve its work-related problems and not wait for top brass to do so. This does require some training in problem-solving so that employees have a structure within which to operate. Training might include how to establish base rates (for when a problem occurs and when it doesn't), how to break down a problem into its parts, how to establish measurement procedures, etc.

Employee Decision Making

A frequent gray area in business has to do with who makes what decision: owner, manager, supervisor, line employee? A significant key to establishing winning teams is empowering individual employees to make more and more decisions on their own. This can be scary for owners and can meet resistance from middle managers and supervisors. Owners wonder about the disasters that can occur if empowerment goes overboard; supervisors are concerned that empowerment of employees means that they will be out of jobs.

The fact of the matter is that neither concern develops. Disasters do not occur and supervisors don't lose their jobs though the nature of their responsibilities does change dramatically. What smooths the path to empowerment is establishing a system of ground rules, a regular review of decisions and overlapping areas of responsibility. In this context supervisors' roles change from "decision-maker" to "enabler".

New Employees

How would you as a business owner feel if you were unwillingly given a partner? Some of you are in that position already, e.g., you might be the son of a deceased founding father and you may be in business with your father's brother who owns 50% of the business. It can get very uncomfortable, can't it?

Employees feel the same way as you would or do. To enhance the functioning of teams it is very important that employees have input into the hiring process, be it screening a host of candidates, interviewing prospects, finding them in the first place, etc.

Pay for Performance and Gain-Sharing

Sharing the wealth is one of the most difficult strategy for business owners to entertain and yet it can paradoxically be one of the most profitable. Compensation that is related to individual productivity, team performance and the performance of the larger team (the business) can and does produce unexpectedly high performance from employees. When sales are down, so is compensation; when it is up, so is compensation; when one department is not performing adequately, compensation reflects that condition. Note that, as in some of the previous steps, I am advocating that employees be invited to identify with ownership, to take some of the same "hits" that owners take and to be rewarded in some of the same ways owners are. The more employees know about the workings of the firm and the more they participate in its ups and downs, the more employees feel part of the working team and feel identified with your dreams.

2. Summary

- If you share information with employees, they will feel a sense of being on the inside.
- If you solicit information, they will feel respected.
- If they participate in planning for the business's future, they will feel an ownership stake in the firm.
- If employees are encouraged to solve problems, they will feel pride in their work.
- If employees are encouraged to make decisions, they will feel trusted.
- If they are involved in the hiring process, they will feel a sense of control and influence.
- If they are paid for their performance and not because of longevity or some other consideration, they will be motivated.

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