

# The Denver Business Journal

(#186)

Business Strategies

September 11, 2009

p A19

## Maybe you're the one who has to change your ways



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Honest self-evaluation and course correction are key traits of great leaders and managers.

For example, suppose you complain that almost everyone in your department or organization is turned off and tuned out. Are they all just a bunch of lazy slackers, a rotten generation – or have you failed somehow?

If your office is typical, you'd expect that a small group of employees won't care no matter what you do. Their lack of discipline, responsibility and effort comes from the inside.

Bribery and coddling may make them happy, but won't make them more productive. They're bottom-feeders.

Another small group, on the other side of a bell curve, will work hard all the time. They

take responsibility and care about your company's success as well as their own.

But if that middle group, roughly 80 percent, doesn't care, be honest and look at yourself. You know that most people do care and want to be productive. Most likely, they gave up because you failed to give them the attention, tools and credit they deserve – or you continually rained criticism on them.

They've concluded that they can't make a difference and you don't care about them, so they come to work and put in the minimum necessary to get by and not get into trouble.

What can you do to stimulate the people in this middle group to go the extra mile for you, your company and their own careers?

It's simple: Create a work environment in which their effort makes a difference and they're also rewarded for their successes.

It's relatively easy to create user-friendly, operating systems so that hard work yields increased productivity and profits. If you maintain an operating system that's painful or thwarts your staff's best

efforts, they'll think, "Why work hard for a jerk who insists on keeping a system that jerks me around?"

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Honestly, the difficult change is in you and your relationships with your employees. But that change is the necessary first step to changing their attitudes and performance. It's necessary because, despite the advertising campaign promoting flat teams, we still look up to our leaders. We're affected by everything they do. Their opinions may mean success or failure for us.

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You can start with three simple changes:

- **Pay attention.** When people talk about great leaders, male or female, they routinely say: “Even when I was at the bottom of the totem pole, that leader paid complete and total attention to me. He listened carefully. I’d do anything for him.”

- **Be honest and courageous.** Listen to the difficult truths; don’t kill the messenger. Put tough issues on the table. Don’t avoid, sugarcoat or put too much spin on them. If you do, people will doubt your sincerity and you’ll lose credibility. Speak up courageously, especially in support of your supervisors and employees. Do the right thing, especially when it’s difficult.

- **Be consistent.** Inconsistent attention leads to frustration and cynicism from your employees.

Josh Leibner and Gershon Mader, authors of the new book, “The Power of Strategic Commitment,” agree.

They say, “Your strategic objectives will be successful

only when your people take ownership of them. Adequate strategies backed by strong people can succeed. Brilliant strategies not supported by staff will fail.”

Some specific tips from them are:

- **Connect, but not through sarcasm, putdowns, witty criticism or bad jokes.** For example, during conference calls, a leader who pushes the mute button and mocks or criticizes people on the road will make everyone in the room think, “He must do that to me when I’m in the road.” If they think you stab people in the back, they’ll never trust any good things you do.

- **Be punctual.** Repeated cancellation, even with excuses, sends a clear message to them, “You don’t matter.” That will be met with a reciprocal, “Why should I care about this job?”

- **During meetings or staff presentations, turn off your Blackberry and don’t habitually look at your watch.** If you routinely tune out and say, “You keep going,” that’s like saying,

“You and your information aren’t important to me,” Employees will think, “My career is on the line and my leader doesn’t think I matter.”

- **Learn the real concerns of people who could be high performers.** Don’t project your hallucinations onto them. Don’t blow off suggestions. Follow through. Admit mistakes and take corrective action. Show you have the best interests of productive staff at heart. This will increase your coaching platform.

- **Don’t hog the credit and shovel the blame.** No one wants to work hard for a narcissistic, self-promoting boss.

I’d add: be honest in your expectations. Will you convert everyone when you start doing what you need to? No, but you’ll see who’s in the bottom-feeder group and who’s so hurt, angry and disaffected that they can’t be won over. Be kindly when you help these latter people leave.

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