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Diversity: Leverage your People for Maximum Success

Business Success is achieved with and through the diversity of people who form your organization. A successful organization is created by bringing people with different personalities, skills, backgrounds, and experiences together and tasking them with a common goal or objective. In fact, when reduced to its pragmatic simplicity, the only thing that truly separates one organization from another is how the diversity of their people is leveraged for maximum success. In essence, how they are lead, inspired and their collective attention focused.

The challenges with combining talented people with different personalities, skills and backgrounds can come into play and often create misunderstandings, frustrations and conflict. Therefore, successful leaders overcome these obstacles by focusing their talented yet diverse people on common and clearly defined goals so that individual and organizational success can be achieved. This leadership skill creates an unbeatable business *culture*. What follows are ten ways to choreograph events within your department or organization so that you can overcome current or historical landmines and re-focus your team toward successful business-related objectives.

1. **Highlight the Differences:** What are the advantages of the various people who form your organization or department? Help them acknowledge the differences, not as a bad thing or even a justification for “this is how I am—don’t change me” but rather, these are the unique characteristics of each person, so how can we leverage these skills and personalities so that we can gain an edge over our competitors. In other words, involve your people, ask for their input and utilize them.
2. **Venting is Needed:** If a process like this hasn’t been successfully implemented before or if there is conflict and negative history, then you may need to let your people “vent” some of the pent up frustrations before you can move on and be productive with the next solution-oriented steps. Go from venting to solution-oriented discussions in a fair amount of time; a good rule of thumb is two to three minutes for each person. Anything past that and the venting turns into a gripe session and people will mentally “shut down.” Limit the number of people in each group from 5-7 and create a “safe” environment so people discuss topics not pick on others.

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3. **Focus the Attention as a Group:** Once peoples' differences have been highlighted, then re-focus the group's attention toward finding solutions to the aforementioned challenges. Then slowly move the group toward solving department and organizational goals and objectives. Ask questions such as; 'what are some possible solutions to that problem,' how might we find a solution in the next seven minutes that will solve problem "X." This re-focusing of attention will often take three to four attempts by the facilitator to refocus the group from engaging in a "venting dialogue to a "solution-oriented mind set and dialogue." Keep at it until the group fully comprehends your "solution oriented" process.

4. **Focus the Attention of each Participant:** In other words, ask each person "what can you do to help the department or organization to achieve this objective?" Break the statements down into manageable parts such as "what behaviors, actions, communication activities (i.e., speaking more clearly, being more precise with your comments, listening fully while not multi-tasking etc), activities will you do to help the department and organization succeed?" People cannot change others, (although they will try) but they can change themselves. Have everyone take personal responsibility and look into themselves for solutions, then share with the group.

5. **What's in it for me:** First, let me clarify three points:
 - 1) Every person is ultimately motivated by only one thing and that is self interest. (For example, even if they help others through a difficult situation or life event, they are receiving inner joy)

 - 2). People are creatures of habit and generally don't like change, even if it benefits them.

 - 3). People will initially and in general terms view change as:
 - negative
 - what it will cost them
 - what they will have to give up
 - Why do they have to change? Why can't others change instead?

Therefore, it is paramount that discussion and "buy-in" precede any business adjustments. The good news is that you don't have to guess. If you simply ask people what will motivate them, they will tell you. Obviously, they will start with "give us more money." However, money and fear are short term mover's, they are not motivator's. In order for money and fear to be effective, one must keep adding more of each or the results will fade quickly. So, what will *intrinsically motivate* people? In other words, what will enrich people, make them proud, help them to

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perform when no one is looking? The research is clear. People want to be listened to, asked to share their ideas, and included—in essence they want to be *valued*. When you value and respect people, you build trust and when you have a group of people focused on a single objective, communicating openly and trusting one another you have an organizational culture that no competitor can beat.

6. **Create a Specific Time-Line:** Everyone in your organization from the board members to the part time help need to be personally accountable every day for moving the organization forward. Therefore, what will each person verbally agree to accomplish toward the goals and objectives within a specific time period i.e., next Wednesday at 3pm? Then thirty days from now, then ninety days and so on through the year? How will these collective and successful actions, statements and behaviors improve the organization and directly impact the customer? If they don't directly and positively impact the internal and external customer then they are a waste of time and resources. They are of no concern and should be crossed off your list.
7. **Visualize the success:** Look ahead one week from now, ninety days from now, six months from now and one year from now and ask the group. “When we implement these solutions, how will our department and organization be improved?” “How will the customer experience be improved?” “How will our bottom line profitability be improved?” “How will our communication, trust, problem solving and workflow improve?” The answers that come from this discussion will inspire and unite your people. Write them down and refer to them often.
8. **Reinforce successes weekly:** Point out what went well and then debrief how it was that people accomplished what they did. Provide homework such as: “between now and our next meeting, be prepared to share examples of solution-oriented conversations, solution-oriented meetings and successful behaviors.” This will reinforce more of the successful “target behaviors.”
9. **Remove Obstacles Swiftly:** Teach, coach, council and as a last resort remove. Start out by teaching and modeling the desired behavior and successful actions. Next, coach people by working with them one on one on how they can become a more valuable member of the department or organization. If this is not effective then council them; perhaps this person is going through a difficult life event and simply needs an objective person to assist them through it. Some people will not be a good fit with your current mix of people and culture no matter how well you teach, coach and council. Therefore, as a last resort you must remove this person. Sometimes certain personalities do not mix well and the best decision is to encourage this person to be successful elsewhere or terminate. This should be done swiftly. The group should know why the person didn't work out so that learning can continue and people know what behaviors didn't fit with

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this culture. Attorneys and HR people will disagree with this advice because of legalities, but from a systemic learning perspective, people need to know what are acceptable and unacceptable actions, statements and behaviors. This will provide clear boundaries for everyone. Besides, the grapevine will talk about it anyway and get most of it wrong. Therefore, I have found it more responsible, clear and less cumbersome simply to handle it head-on and with honesty.

10. Clarify the overall objectives and refine this process:

- a. Highlight the differences: Diversity among your people is what will distance you from your competition. Celebrate differences, Leverage strengths, and learn to understand one another more effectively.
- b. Venting is uncomfortable but necessary. Move through it thoroughly and quickly.
- c. Create group cohesion by focusing their attention on a unifying goal.
- d. Distill the process down further by helping each person take ownership for their part of this process.
- e. Ask each person what they need and how this process will benefit them.
- f. Implement precise timelines with clear and personal accountabilities.
- g. Ensure long term learning and success by discussing the future as you would like it to be. In other words, visualize your future success with as much detail as possible.
- h. Discuss specific examples of people behaving with newly acquired successes on a weekly basis. This will create successful habits and provide a basis for the new emerging culture.
- i. Teach and coach your people so they can become more successful. Some people will need additional one on one support or counseling. If none of these actions are successful then everyone will be better off by removing the obstacle and encouraging them to find success elsewhere.
- j. Create a feedback loop of what went well and what still needs to be refined further.