leading the team

Michael O'Neil

Today every organization has a variety of audiences it must serve. These groups include customers, employees, the community, the government, the industry of which it is a part, stockholders and vendors. Satisfying the needs of each of these constituencies dictates the objectives of the organization. If you were asked to pick one word which would describe what all of these groups have in common, which word would you choose? Well, there might be many, but one which certainly fits the criteria is the word "more." The problem is, in many cases, we're dealing with a "fixed pie." For one group to get more, another one has to get less, or we can increase the size of the pie. There is, however, only one group that can do something about the latter alternative – and that is the employees. They are the ones who impact productivity and, ultimately, the bottom line.

So management is faced with the challenge of finding a way to synergistically blend, develop and motivate the human resources within the organization. One of the ways of doing this now and in the years ahead will be through team-building.

The relationship today between employees and management has to be more of a partnership. This involves continuous training and learning on the part of everyone in the organization. True motivation requires the sharing of information that affects the employee's job goals as well as the overall goals of the organization that everyone is striving to achieve. Information regarding where the company is, where it wants to go and what the obstacles are in getting there can be a catalyst in helping employees develop a feeling of ownership in their jobs. Whether it be safety, service or quality, each individual should know his or her role and be allowed to play it. When employees have faith and trust in the organization, they start to treat the assets of the company as if they were their own.

Organizational success has a lot to do with the extent to which management "lets go." This includes encouraging, training and permitting employees to accept and take on new responsibilities and accountabilities. It is becoming increasingly important that decisions be made by the people closest to the decision.

Many managers are going to be asked to lead a team – in one way or another – in the years ahead. Some of the managerial role changes that will need to be considered will include the following:

✔ *Reduction of some control*

✔ *Greater use of "people skills"*

✔ *Understanding and usage of group dynamics*

✔ *Greater use of facilitation skills*

✔ *Familiarity with cross-functional tasks and operations*

✔ *Vision developer*

✔ *Handling conflict and ambiguity*

✔ *Becoming a better listener*

✔ *Communicate to a greater degree the values and "shared" meanings of the organization*

✔ *Generating a consensus of opinion among team members.*

In team-building, as is evident, the influence power of a manager is tested. The goal is commitment – not just plain obedience. With teamwork comes that intangible, results-oriented element called "synergism." It's when $2+2=5$ instead of 4. Ideas and actions are combined in a manner that supersedes any individual effort. When everything's going right, it's something you want to cherish and hold on to, because all the parts are working "in harmony." The challenge is to create an encore performance each and every day. This task is made easier with competent, motivated, involved employees who jointly want to do what's right for the customer.

The structure of a team can take many forms. Whatever form you choose, however, there are some "support systems" you might want to consider incorporating as a part of the foundation of your team-building efforts. Let's use the restaurant business as an example. Here are some things you might want to do:

Initiate and update wall charts with pertinent information on such things as sales, labor costs, food costs, waste, promotional costs, etc.

Develop various "mind-joggers" that can be put on wall charts or on floor mats since many people look down when they walk. Concepts such as the following might be used:
  – Focused excellence
  – Everyone is an internal supplier
  – Zero defects
  – We are all dependent on each other
  – Manage each impression as if it were your first and last
  – Attitude is everything

Put job-aid notes on the cash register to help out the employee who might not know what to say to a frustrated customer. All the employee has to do is "read the line." This provides a certain degree of confidence.

Develop and nurture an elite identity for your team.

Construct a Problem Avoidance List that can be placed where everyone can see it. Get the input of all team members as to what should go on this list. You now have many eyes and ears spotting potential problems – such as wobbly chairs, burned-out lights, customers waiting, etc.

Develop a "just-in-time" scheduling system. In the service business, you can never predict when someone will call in sick or whatever. On a busy day or night, this can be disastrous. So pay 2-3 people to stay home for "x" number of hours in the event they might be needed. The amount of compensation per hour would have to be determined. Also be sure to check on the legal requirements regarding this.

Publish an "Acres of Diamonds" bulletin. Let team members know what's going right and point out some positive things employees might be taking for granted.

Put together a "Shift Assessment Sheet." The idea of this is to avoid surprises if you're the head manager. On a piece of paper put three sections – Problem(s) Encountered, Action Taken and Comments. Ask each employee on each shift to complete the form, if necessary, and put it in a box

outside your office. When you come in the next morning, you'll be well-advised of what was resolved and/or what to expect.

Devise an incentive system that rewards your "Best Month Ever" – one in which each member of the team benefits. The category you choose for measurement could, obviously, be one of many, e.g., sales volume, customer complaints, etc.

Institute a system for team compensation on an ongoing basis that supplements the individual compensation system. This can be done in a variety of ways.

In today's work environment, we hear a variety of new ideas being discussed – concepts such as empowerment, visionary, entrepreneur, boundary spanner, external alliances, cross-functional work teams, horizontal distribution of information, networking – just to name a few. What all this means is more and more individuals are being given a bigger and bigger voice in what goes on in many organizations. As a result, many people are becoming more productive and many organizations, as a result, are generating greater profits. It's people working together in a synergistic, team-oriented mode – led by a versatile, adaptive manager/facilitator – that may very well be the model to be emulated in today's changing world. §V

Michael O'Neil is Assistant Professor of Business at the University of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne, IN. He is also a consultant, author and professional speaker.