

Leadership Tune Up – First of a Series



Bruce W. Woolpert Tuesday, December 20, 2011, 4:17 pm

Managers can occasionally benefit from a leadership “tune-up” The outside world may push us slightly off track. Like maintaining the precise operation of a high performance engine, organizational leaders need to stop occasionally to push the reset button. The leadership engine is running, but is it running most effectively? There are small skill-alignment tweaks to be made that greatly enhance organizational performance and help leaders to feel successful with the difficult work they do. Many of these tune-up skills are helpful for everyone in an organization. This is the first installment of a six part series of important tips for managers.

Communications

Communicating the organization’s objectives and strategy lets people know what is important to the organization’s short- and long-term success. An organization builds individual and teamwork motivation when everyone knows where the organization is going and how it is currently doing. Communication is at the center of good leadership. People know that an organization running without a clear purpose – purpose often described by goals – is headed nowhere and will soon drift downhill. When organizations effectively achieve goals, team members have the highest morale and work satisfaction.

Leadership Tune Up – Part Two



Bruce W. Woolpert Thursday, December 29, 2011, 4:26 pm

Doing What Is Right. Team members occasionally face real-life challenges and concerns at home or work that need a manager’s involvement or at least support. There is often a difference between what is found in policies and doing what the manager knows is the right thing to do under particular circumstances. People want and expect their specific concerns to be understood and dealt with. Treating every similar situation the same – the broad paint brush approach — isn’t the best way to go. Yet, some organizations advocate that equal treatment supports fairness. But this misuses the meaning of fairness; fairness means acting in accordance with needs or requirements. Fairness, justice, and doing the right thing are inherent to knowing that our opinions, concerns, and interests matter. Organizations that misuse the concept of fairness build a sameness of action which results in everyone saying “they treat me like I’m a number.”

Leadership Tune Up – Part Three



Bruce W. Woolpert Tuesday, January 3, 2012, 8:06 am

Telling the Truth – Even When It’s Not Popular. Especially around elections, it seems that few people running for national office offer true integrity. Integrity requires more than telling the truth. It also requires explaining things to people with sufficient truthful detail that they can make their own well-informed decisions. When decisions are made, telling the truth means explaining the decisions — even the unpleasant parts most of us don’t really like to hear. Leadership is not about running a successful public relations campaign to shift blame to others. Business organizations need to make sure that this “blame culture” isn’t allowed to take root. Blame destroys people relationships at work, and with people no longer able to work effectively together, it is only a matter of time before the organization suffers from serious lack of customer responsiveness and product quality slips. Trust in management is always seriously undermined if managers mistakenly believe that blame motivates long-term change. It does not.

Leadership Tune Up – Part Four



Bruce W. Woolpert Monday, January 16, 2012, 7:56 am

Performance Measurement. Performance measurement fuels organizational improvement and forward progress. What gets measured gets done. If objective measurement isn’t possible, then do the best you can with a subjective measurement tool. At Graniterock, we have nine Corporate Objectives important to Graniterock’s future success. We do a better job supporting the achievement of our objectives when we spend more time thinking about better measures of how well we are doing. Performance measures are working if continuous improvement is taking place.

When improvement isn’t happening, there is likely a problem with understanding the objective within the organization, or performance measures aren’t viewed as the organization’s scorecard.

Leadership Tune Up – Part Five



Bruce W. Woolpert Sunday, January 22, 2012, 9:19 am

No Fear of Repercussions for Mistakes. Every creative or innovative change carries with it risk that it won't work, and if it doesn't work, our fear is that our action will be viewed as folly. Embarrassment is a valid concern for people. When that embarrassment comes as a result of making an honest mistake, the manager's actions are viewed as horribly dishonest. People learn best by doing and making mistakes. If people are concerned about potential embarrassment, they will rely on their manager to make all of the decisions. Customer responsive organizations are never effective when everyone has become dependent upon the time and judgment of a few managers. Innovation stops, risk-taking stops, and the status quo rules. Never reprimand or make even well intentioned criticisms about the performance of anyone in public. This must always be done in private even when the issue may seem insignificant.

Leadership Tune Up – Part Six



Bruce W. Woolpert Sunday, January 29, 2012, 4:57 pm

Having an Effective Leadership Framework. Graniterock Team Members have learned a great deal from seminars conducted by Larry Bonine, former Arizona Department of Transportation Director and now head of the Pinnacle Leadership consulting firm. Larry tells his audiences that the best managers view workers in the role of volunteers. Larry's thinking offers a useful framework for managers to evaluate management approaches — deciding between the effective ones and discarding those that should no longer be used. Volunteers are motivated by buy-in to an organization's goals, by an opportunity to self-lead actions about how best to help, and by working in a team environment in which other people genuinely share the same goals. Leaders understand the importance of supporting and achieving a worthwhile purpose to Americans – regardless of whether someone's job title is volunteer or worker.

Leadership: Part Flexibility and Part Structure



Bruce W. Woolpert Monday, May 28, 2012, 7:34 pm

Professor Dean Chemers, Vice-Provost and Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has studied organizational leadership approaches and has a strong mastery of research and literature on the subject. In September, 1998, Bruce W. Woolpert summarized some of his thinking for Construction Update readers. What was written then holds true today.

For effective leadership to exist in an organization, whether it is a private business, government, educational or non-profit institution, there must be a stable environment in which people can come to know and understand what the organization is all about. Leaders must practice approaches which are flexible and able to change to fit the situation, and also structured with consistent, expectable and clearly articulated rules and direction.

Stable environments generate trust when they arise from consistent processes and goals. In other words, the organization has staked out a way of organizing, getting things done and setting goals and everyone can count on it to continue. If approaches and goals constantly change, trust cannot develop and leadership will be unsuccessful. When environments are stable, a “shared meaning” is allowed to develop about how things get done and what needs to get done.

Highly successful leaders rely on both science and art. A skillful leader operates in both a tight and flexible fashion, depending on the needs of the situation. All good leaders share two attributes: confidence in his or her own abilities and optimism that things will work out okay. Extensive research gives us insight into an effective leader’s day to day practices.

1. Leaders perform like leaders all the time. They practice honesty and integrity faithfully, and trust other people to do a good job.
2. Leaders build relationships. They view their relationships with others not from a group perspective, but as individuals. Coaching and support is offered to encourage individual accomplishment and success, and it varies depending upon the needs of each person. By caring strongly about people, a good leader automatically motivates others to care about their own work and accomplishments. Finally, a strong leader never shows any doubt about an individual’s ability to succeed.
3. Leaders mobilize people. A leader displays the confidence that goals and obstacles can be accomplished despite great difficulties ahead. This is not an act,

but rather an inner strength which gives a leader a very high level of self confidence and confidence in each individual's abilities. By sharing this belief, others come to accept the possibility that goals will be achieved. Confidence is increased because beliefs about what's possible have been enhanced. Without such increased and changed beliefs, an organization's "horsepower" is capped at historic levels.

People increase their efficacy or capacity (ability to do what they might have previously thought impossible) by setting increasingly higher goals. This graduated mastery, along with role modeling made possible by watching others perform more difficult jobs and social persuasion, or the fear of being left behind, help move the organization forward.

In summary, organizations without leadership lack horsepower and in today's world cannot be expected to survive for long. A strong leader is always honest and steadfast in integrity, deeply believes in and cares about people and their ability to grow and stretch, and displays confidence in the group's ability to accomplish tough goals. Leaders must be consistent and lead 100% of the time. With this need for consistency, leaders cannot be successful if their behavior is just an act, because they'll eventually slip up and vaporize everything they have built up. What took months and years to build can be destroyed in a moment, and trust and shared beliefs can be lost with one poor decision.

Fix the Problems—Then We Have Fully Responded to Customer Feedback; So the Thinking Goes...



Bruce W. Woolpert Wednesday, July 28, 2010, 10:08 am

How do businesses manage customer feedback? The feedback could arrive in a letter, a phone call, a face-to-face meeting, or a formal customer satisfaction survey. In most organizations, businesses focus nearly all of organization's time and energy on what the feedback tells us didn't go well or areas in which the business fell short of a competitor. Effort is needed to attack these problem areas and correct them. The goal is to be the best at earning a customer's business every day. The thinking is that if we eliminate any "negatives" then customers will want to continue to do business with us.

Actually, the necessary work of effectively utilizing customer feedback is far from complete. What's missing is developing a clear, well-communicated understanding within our business teams regarding reasons why customers are already doing business with us. We are already doing many things right to earn a customer's business (or we would already be out of business). But, I find in an amazing number of businesses, or departments within a large organization, there is very little understanding and precious little agreement within the organization on what those "positive things" are. If the question is asked internally, so why did "Customer X" decide that spending money with us today was a good idea? The answers are often couched in the service-focused personality of a single sales representative or a gregarious private work estimator. Such non-thoroughly considered responses tell everyone in the organization that the current success (and by implication future success) is not dependent on the entire team's hard work in meeting customer needs. We all know that an organization's service delivery is like a strand of metal chain—our service quality system can only be as strong as the weakest single link in that chain.

Every member of the team carries out an essential function (single link) in serving a customer (or we don't need that function to be performed). No business can allow weak performing links. The feedback tells us which link fell down, but it also implicitly tells us that the rest of the chain of service did well. In making the customer satisfaction chain strongest, we need to fix the broken links and strengthen the positive performing ones. Otherwise, and it happens regularly across America, the positive customer service links gradually weaken. That's why you often hear about a supplier or contractor, "their service was better many years ago."

Taking an example, a customer complains in a face-to-face meeting about invoice timeliness and accuracy. Does that not occur normally at the end of the service chain? We shouldn't forget to ask about how service performance had gone up until invoicing? What the customer is likely saying is "everything starting with placing the order through delivery of the product or service met my needs, but at the end of this business

transaction, the invoicing fell down.” So, we didn’t just learn that a customer thinks invoicing needs to be improved. The other message is “keep doing well what you are already doing well.” It’s important to have a discussion with our teams about each step of the customer service process, in other words define the service chain, and reinforce what is performing well for customers and then talk about how to fix what is broken. This strengthens the positives so that they are consistently done well by everyone. Remember, these positives are essential to our business, because these strengths are why customers are doing business with you now. Strengthen them AND also address the invoicing deficiency. Do not allow those strengths to be taken for granted as they will require continuous improvement.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, Nordstrom was considered the unquestioned customer service leader in retailing. James and Bruce Nordstrom told Graniterock People that it was a never-ending challenge to get store clerks to cheerfully exchange merchandise or give customers their money back. They tracked “return percentages” at each store and when the percentage went down slightly (as they inevitably did) they visited the store to get trends headed in the right direction again. The Nordstrom brothers had learned that it was human nature to protect the business by “not wanting to give customers their money back.” So, over time, retail associates naturally and gradually lost their enthusiasm for returns, yet when good return practices were celebrated and reinforced, this customer satisfaction link did not wither.

There are countless other business customer satisfaction chain links: quickly answering telephones and taking responsibility for the caller’s complete needs without passing the caller onto someone else; being available to customers whenever the customer needs something done; be product and service expert-knowledgeable so customer advice and support are effective and valuable; do what you say you will do for a customer—keep 100% of your commitments; take care of problems with even greater courtesy and professionalism than you did in taking the customer’s order in the first place; and always abide by the organization’s core values especially honesty and integrity in all dealings with customers, co-workers and members of the public. These satisfaction-link examples weaken on their own if their importance is not consistently celebrated, re-enforced and re-taught. When we use customer feedback to teach only what is wrong, we miss a very important opportunity to build cohesiveness in delivering service quality. Research studies have shown that the highest performing business organizations are those in which everyone in the organization can automatically, and without discussion, anticipate how the organization will respond to customer need situations. There exists among team members an “implicit agreement” on all of the service links that matter the most.