

Unleash The Full Power and Potential of the People Who Work For You!

Tony Ward-Smith

Managers, here's a hard, cruel fact: Your success is not exactly in your own hands! As hard as you work, as many hours as you put in, as brilliant, clever and creative as you might be...the only way your credit union is going to grow, succeed and deliver on the promise you have with all your members— is through the efforts of your employees! Bottom line— it's the people who work for you who'll determine the extent of your professional success.

When the effective performance of your credit union is summarized in those simple, but totally true terms, you can see that your primary function as a manager and leader—the one that rides high above all others—is to build a highly-motivated team of people all working toward the same goal. Rather than getting them to work harder and do their jobs better— your primary objective is to figure out how to get them to help you do your job better...how to get them to help you succeed.

And here the point we're trying to stress is that of “commitment” beyond mere employment. “Buy-in” is another term for it. “Dedication” is one more way of talking about it.

It takes a number of people working together to make a credit union go. So you hire them. Each time you do, you agree on various terms of the deal— duties and responsibilities, salary and benefits for them...performance, productivity and outcomes for the CU. That's the employment process. We all go this far.

But what we're looking for is something beyond this. We're looking for commitment, and not everyone gets that! The challenge for employers, from the day they hire people, is that of winning them over to the organization's prime objective in a dedicated, involved, invested, caring way. How? There are three basic ways:

1. Start with them

The “rule” for having a successful and winning relationship with someone— to the extent there are any real rules— is to be genuinely interested in them. Really care about them. Value them. Pay attention to them. And the best way to do this with your employees is to find out what is important to them. Ask, enquire, engage, chat, probe, discuss, draw out, find out.

Interestingly, so many people, especially young people early in their adulthood, haven't reached the point of asking themselves this kind of question. Not in any formal deliberate way, anyway. So responses won't necessarily come easy. Conclusions won't tumble forth. But that's quite okay, because it is the question itself that is important. That and the genuineness of the intention behind it. For any of us, this “what-are-your-goals, what's-important-to-you?” question is the start of the most interesting, most intriguing discussion we can ever have...with ourselves or any other human.

Are we getting too personal here? Not if we see that the work we do, the particular activity we engage in for the better part of most days, serves, to a very large extent, to define much of who we are. And the outcomes of employment— knowledge, responsibility and maturity, personal advancement, status and position, broadening of experiences, social interactions, and yes— compensation and benefits— all collectively serve to shape us into the people we become. So as employers, we go down this questioning track with the intention of seeing that the employment situation we present to our people is positive, rewarding, and beneficial— for them as well as for the organization.

Sum it all up— Rule Number One is this: The way to win commitment from your employees to your organization's objectives and concerns— is to begin by being genuinely interested and overtly committed to theirs!

2. Hold to a sensible, clear-cut agenda

The next trick to getting others to understand you, is for you to have just a few, very definite things to understand. For the most part, your employees definitely want to please you. But what does that require? Do they know, or is there vagueness and confusion about it?

This one sounds easy. Too easy. But reality is far from that. If it were so easy, more credit unions would have a much tighter grip on it. Think for a minute— if you asked your employees to write down the one thing that is paramount within the organization, the one objective that reigns supreme above all others, could they? And if they did, would they all agree on what it was?

Often in strategic planning sessions when we ask managers and directors to do this we get a wide array of responses, and seldom is there anything close to a strong group consensus. We know why this is. The business of running credit unions today, of holding our own in the highly competitive arena of consumer banking, involves so many issues and calls for so many different considerations and concerns—no wonder the list is so extensive. But when there are so many objectives, too many priorities, and all of them apparently of equal importance, nothing is particularly important. Nothing stands apart as the prime issue of intent.

It's here that the distinction between management and leadership comes clear, and why organizations can have multiple managers and supervisors, but should have only one leader, and why, of course, the buck stops with him/her! It is the captain of the ship who is singularly responsible for seeing that it reaches its destination.

Again, given all the issues, objectives, projects and concerns to be tended to on an on-going basis, what is the single most important objective within your credit union? There should be one...ONE. Everyone should know it. Everyone should understand and accept it. Everyone should believe in it.

3. Talk with them, not at them

Think of this—really good leadership is subtle leadership. It's when the right things happen, not because people are told what to do and held hard to it, but because they themselves want to achieve particular outcomes. And here the conversation comes back to “commitment” and “buy-in” again.

One of the most generous, most respectful things one person can do for another—is to ask what he/she thinks. And do it in a genuine way, of course. This is the supreme act that validates people in their own eyes and those of their significant associates. It makes them feel “worthy”. It confirms that their ideas and opinions count. It makes them whole as thinking, contributing, valuable human beings.

If you ask any of your employees what they think about a particular problem, and they offer some thoughtful suggestions regarding possible solutions, you can bet that—1) the particular problem has become, to some degree, their problem, and—2) they will consciously or subconsciously follow up with efforts that prove that their thoughts were “right” and on-target.

People want to be good performers, to be useful, to be important—to themselves, their peers and to their superi-

ors. People want to be listened to. They want to be heard. They want to be seen as having something to contribute.

For decades we have not managed people this way in employment situations. Rather, we've told them what was expected of them, told them to work harder, told them when they weren't doing so well, and maybe we did let them know, occasionally, when they “did good”. But it was generally a one-way conversation, and it all flowed down hill. And never did it help managers get the most out of their people.

Today we know enough to talk about participative management wherein those who actually do the work are generally the ones who know best how to improve the processes involved. They're closer to the specifics and they constantly have ideas about how they might do things differently, or better, or produce more. The concept is simple enough. Leaders set goals and give meaning and relevance to them (the word “inspiration” fits in nicely here!). The performers get actively involved in figuring out how the goals can best be achieved. And commitment is the element that drives it all. Use The Proper Tool (And Use It Properly!)

So it's quite a simple three-part formula:

1. Win the commitment of your employees by being genuinely interested in them and their personal success
2. Present them with a clear, simple, understandable, on-target objective to buy into.
3. Win their “buy-in” by listening to their suggestions for achieving the objective.

Does it work? Absolutely. It's a “can't fail” solution, based on the factors that motivate us all as human beings. And all any organization needs to do to be more effective, more productive—is to formalize this collective process into a “management style”.

This is where the employee survey comes into play. Generally, employee surveys are seen as “pulse-taking” exercises, conducted by the HR Department, to assess the “morale” of the employee force. But the best use of this vital tool is as the key element that facilitates a two-way dialogue that generates stronger commitment on the part of employees, and results in stronger overall achievement on the part of the organization.