

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, January 4, 2002

Rallying the troops

How to get your employees to buy into a new direction

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question: As 2001 ended, our management team spent time assessing the company's performance. Like many companies, we weren't thrilled with how things turned out. But who could have predicted the events of Sept. 11 and the economic fall-out that followed? Things were pretty flat before that anyway, so 2001 wasn't going to be a record-breaking year. We're not looking to make any profound changes for 2002, but we're going to try to steer things in a slightly different direction. We want our employees to rally together in ways they haven't. We need to work together to compete. What can we do to get our employees to join us?

Answer: The beginning of the new year is often the time for personal reflection and assessment. We look back on what was and was not accomplished in the previous year. We look ahead to the challenges and opportunities that the new year holds. Some of us go so far as to formulate resolutions that demonstrate the strength of our commitment to various lifestyle changes we intend to pursue (e.g., "No more of those rich desserts!").

This kind of stocktaking is also applicable on an organizational

level. Organizations, too, can make some resolutions for the new year. The place to get started is with some reflection about the past year. Here are some questions for you and your colleagues to consider:

1. Why does this business exist?

This is a broad question that should help you to reflect upon your definition of "the big picture." Spending time pondering it will lead you toward other related questions. What was the big picture when your company was formed? How has it evolved over time? What is the vision for the future? What does it mean to work at this company? How is your company doing within the industry? How does it compare with the competition? What have been and what will be your company's driving forces? How will you meet (and continue to meet) your company's profit objectives?

2. What kind of culture do we want?

This is an important question because it addresses the central concern of the psychological contract that is forged between employer and employee. What are the fundamental features (e.g., work conditions, pay/benefits, managerial approach, technology, etc.) that you want your organization to exhibit? Which elements are satisfying (and dissatisfying) to employees? What messages does management send to the employees? To what extent are these messages consistent with management's overt behavior?

3. How do we do our work?

This is a crucial question because it goes to the heart of your operation. Are your tools, technologies, and processes as effective and efficient as they could be? Where are the opportunities for improvement? What will it take to pursue these opportunities? How much time do you spend researching and developing new approaches? What one innovation, if it could be realized this year, would transform your business?

4. With what kinds of employees do we wish to work?

Obviously, your responses to the above question would be impossible to pursue without employees to deploy. Any company that succeeds does so as a result of the efforts of its people. Yet, today, with the

aging baby boomers beginning to retire, the composition of the workforce is changing. The new workforce is characterized by increasing numbers of women, minorities, and employees who are better educated, particularly in terms of technology know-how. What is your company doing to keep up with these trends? Are you embracing younger employees and welcoming them to the team or scratching your head, wondering why they “don’t get it?” Has your method of screening employees become more sophisticated, matching the developments in the nature of the work that is done? Has your company made a commitment to employee learning, at all levels? On what basis do you compensate employees? Have you explored the concept of performance-based pay?

My sense is that by answering these and other related questions, you will have a pretty good handle on where your company stands as the new year unfolds. In light of your discussions, you may identify some areas for improvement. These can form the basis for the resolutions that I made mention of earlier in this article. Such commitments can help you to focus on “what really matters” during the present period of economic uncertainty.

In addition to resolutions specific to your company, here are three resolutions that I believe are applicable to any company:

1. Focus on people.

Renew your commitment to your company’s most important asset. Instead of slashing the training budget, invest in your employees. Equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to drive the business forward through this sluggish period. Help them to help your company persevere and compete.

2. Focus on work processes.

Renew your commitment to becoming a high performance company by developing and building effective work processes. Push the envelope in this area. Don’t limit your efforts to task-oriented process (e.g., production/operations, customer service, etc.). Spend time on other important processes that impact job performance such as team building, job design, goal setting, leadership, problem solving and decision-making, and conflict resolution.

3. Focus on adaptation.

Renew your commitment to embracing change. It is true that a new year inevitably brings change. It is also true that in our increasingly fast-paced world, change cannot be avoided. In light of this, resolve to pursue a systematic program of planned change and reengineering. Focus on high impact areas such as organizational structure, technology, physical environment, and social factors. With respect to this last element, spend time investigating your employees’ work-family issues, stressors, and wellness concerns.

Resolve to become an employer of choice, one characterized by both “high tech” and “high touch.”

I hope the new year bring you a series of positive challenges. And, perhaps influenced by some of the issues I share in this article, I hope you are ready to meet them.



Daniel Schroeder, Ph.D., of Organization Development Consultants, Inc. (ODC), in Brookfield provides HR Connection. Small Business Times readers who would like to see an issue discussed in a column may reach him at 262-827-1901, via fax at 262-827-8383, or via e-mail at schroeder@odcons.com.