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Where's the passion?

Capture your employees' hearts

Question:

I'm a member of the senior leadership team at a company in the Milwaukee area. I saw your column "Style matters: Would you follow yourself?" in the March 18 issue of Biz Times Milwaukee. The sub-title struck home for me. Our company is in the midst of a transition (e.g., new products, new markets, and even a new building for our headquarters). While there is a lot of activity, it seems like employees aren't very enthusiastic of excited about the changes underway. This includes the senior leadership team. People seem to be just going through the motions. I keep asking myself, "Where's the passion?" As leaders, what can we do to break through this malaise?

Answer:

In the column the reader references, I wrote about the concept of "leadership style," the idea that each of us has a characteristic way of leading, and that if we are intentional about it, we can flex our leadership style in response to situational needs. I made the point that leadership must be defined in terms of "followership." In other words, if you're leading and no one's following, then you're not leading.

Leadership, then, has to do with getting people to follow you when they have the option not to do so. Leadership occurs when individuals below you in the organizational hierarchy willingly comply with directives you offer. Followers offer their efforts freely and fully when they are effectively led.

The situation you describe does not fit this definition. In short, you describe a situation in which a leadership challenge exists. In this column, I will offer some comments and suggestions for going deeper to capture the hearts of your employees, as well as their heads.

The top leaders are the architects of the organization. They set the tone, by what they say (and don't say) and do (and don't do). Managers and supervisors are analogous to construction foremen in the sense that their focus is operational and

their goal is to get the work done. Front-line employees are analogous to bricklayers in the sense that they operate at the tactical level and take care of micro-level tasks and activities.

To be maximally effective, top leaders must focus on the Three P's of the internal business environment:

- » **Purpose** – "Why does this organization exist?"
- » **Partnership** – "With whom do we do our work?"
- » **Process** – "How do we do our work?"

To do so, top leaders must evaluate performance in these four areas: (1) employees, (2) processes and operations, (3) customers, and (4) financial. More to the point, top leaders must help the rest of the organization connect the dots among these important aspects of organizational performance. For example, a high tech (HT) model is created when process variables are connected with financial variables (i.e., efficient and effective performance).

Another HT model, "high touch," is created when employee variables are connected with customer variables (i.e., "people who are well served, serving others well"). Ultimately, by connecting the dots across and among these areas of organiza-

tional functioning, a "peak performance" model is created (i.e., $HT \times HT = HT^2$).

Of course, all of this has to do with answering the foundational question, "Why does this organization exist?" and the associated question for employees, "Why do I choose to work for this organization, to offer my gifts and talents to its quest?"

People comprise organizations. Your people comprise your organization. What are you doing to help them resonate with the organization's "reason for being?" (i.e., the "why"). If employees' reasons for being don't have much to do with the organization's reason for being, then why in the world are you surprised that they aren't engaged with the change initiatives you have underway?

Simon Sinek, author of the stimulating book, *Start with Why*, visited Milwaukee on April 14 to address the 2011 Inspirational Leadership event, hosted by TEC. I was fortunate to be among the 300 or so attendees at the session. Sinek's thesis is that "Why?" is where organizations must start if they are to flourish in these turbulent economic times. According to Sinek, when we do an effective job in answering that question, we get to the core of what we are. We get to core issues having to do with purpose, values, and beliefs. Leaders who lead with "why" generate loyalty because they operate with authenticity.

In the final analysis, my suggestion is that you and your colleagues within the senior leadership team, pause for a moment, and spend some time answering the question, "Why?" Why do our customers choose to work with us? Why do our

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employees choose to work for us? Why do our direct reports choose to follow us?

Dig deeply. Go beyond the “what” (e.g., functions, activities, transactions, etc.) toward the foundational (e.g., How does our existence as a company make our customers whole? How do we “complete” them?)

Think about the catalyzing effect you can have in developing compelling answers to these kinds of challenging questions. Think of the storytelling you can unleash to help employees see and feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves, something that really matters.

Think about how you would feel at some point in the future when you walk up to one of your front-line employees (i.e., a bricklayer) and you ask him or her, “What do you do around here?” and his or her reply was, “We build cathedrals!”

What a difference that reply is from what might be the expected answer to very same question today, “I lean on my knees all day, trowel cement, and lay bricks.”

Which organization do you want to lead?

Start with Why! ■

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