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The Essential Difference

STATUTORILY EXEMPT

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The essential difference in the degree of success achieved by an organization is often the result of the attention a manager gives to the job and to the people who get the job done. This paper suggests specific ways to make that essential difference.

Public television featured a story some time ago about a tribe of people which did not care for its children past very early infancy, gave no help to its old, weak, or helpless members, and in time of calamity, left each person to do whatever he could for himself. The tribe had no common goal, no sense of cooperation, no spirit of challenge. Individuality had run amuck. Those societies, on the other hand, in which people are totally subject to a government, or a sense of communal life, seem somehow to suppress the energy that produces inventive breakthroughs. In less than ideal settings, the result is suppression or stagnation. Within the smaller society formed by people at work, some of the same problems are reflected. There is an essential difference between a successful, forward-moving group of people working on a given task and a group of people who never seem to meet goals or do so only with high attrition rates. Both organizations may perform equally well on the surface. In time, however, the organization which blends the interests of its people and its task will be more successful. The essential difference in achieving this success is often the result of the attention a manager gives to the job and to the people who get that job done. This paper will suggest specific ways to make that essential difference.

The organization has, as its main purpose, to accomplish some task. The people who work within the organization may wish simply to earn a living, may be dedicated to a common lofty goal (religion, patriotism), or may want to occupy time usefully (semiretirement). Fusing the varying and numerous motivations of the organization and its people is the uniquely important function of the manager. A clear set of goals, a standard of excellence, and a realistic approach are essential to task planning. Autonomy, recognition, and challenge are strong motivations for people. A sense of cooperation and unity, along with flexibility, seem to mark those organizations which are the most creative and alert.

Planning is a most useful process in achieving any goal. Before a task is undertaken, some thought to possible approaches, problems, and results can make the difference between success or failure. Goals should be clearly communicated throughout the organizational chain. Everyone's perception of the task can be reinforced if goals are in written form and can be referred to periodically in formal meetings and informal conversations. A possible objective checklist can be included if it would help focus organizational attention on the task. This checklist approach need not be exhaustive. It does help ensure that the various approaches do relate to the task and are being accomplished.

The process of putting a plan on paper gets the attention of the group and encourages management to be very clear in its goals. It is easy to be vague in conversation, relying on statements such as "You know what I mean!" when, in fact, no one can read another person's mind or, worse yet, someone may think he can. A whole group can go off in a totally wrong direction feeling very sure that it is doing "what the boss wants."

It is equally important that meetings, conversations, and conferences take place. The written word makes ideas more clear in one sense but can be too sterile or not precise enough. The reader may bring his own set of biases or limitations to his interpretation of a written set of goals (i.e., vocabulary, nuance, etc.). Therefore, planning should involve the concrete, the written set of goals, and the interpretive discussions among managers and with superiors and subordinates.

Planning takes time. The manager needs to schedule regular periods where he can organize his ideas about how his work center is doing in terms of its purpose and how his people are doing in their work and personal development. In addition to regular planning sessions of his own, the leader of an organization should take time to set goals with his team and with individuals. Group dynamics provoke new ideas and solutions as one person's comment sparks another's thought process. Some individuals are most creative on a one-to-one basis or when asked to submit their ideas in writing. Fusing these raw ideas by different methods into a plan that is perceivable (in writing) and accurately interpreted (in discussion) is the truly creative job of a manager. The investment in time that this planning takes should be acknowledged as a wise investment in getting a job done efficiently.

A standard of excellence acknowledged by the members of the organization is helpful in ensuring that a stated set of goals can be achieved. The expectation that an organization will accomplish its task thoroughly helps to ensure that the result will be to a high standard. Knowing what this expectation is, people will check themselves periodically before completing an assignment. This regular self-checking helps eliminate errors and fuzzy thinking. Checks on accuracy, good record keeping, and clear expression of ideas become minigoals in themselves and provide a historical base for checking the progress of an entire task. Attention to detail promotes thoroughness. Deadlines, interim and final, maintain a sense of orderly progression. Backup projects help adjust for the unexpected. Periodic review of results by a team of workers and/or by managers assesses the direction the work is taking and allows for adjustments. People feel proud to be working in a organization that does well. Setting measurable standards of excellence assures that this feeling of pride is based on documented progress.

Direction toward a goal and acknowledgment of an expected standard are useful only when they are seen in a context of what is realistically achievable. Equipment necessary to the job must be available. Assessments used in setting goals and deadlines should be based on research related to the task. Personnel and support should be allocated sufficiently. The end toward which the organization effort is being directed should be attainable. Sometimes, the most realistic course of action is to move slowly and methodically in a series of possible directions until the best course becomes more clear. If equipment does not show up as planned, an interim task related to the overall goal can be initiated; e.g., go over the task plan one more time, research the problem background more thoroughly, or set up a class for the people who are waiting for that equipment. If people or supplies are lacking, it is the manager's responsibility to work very hard to get more. If the resources are overabundant, the manager should see the value in expanding his people's interest into new projects.

Organizations and their goals are easily stymied without a competent interaction of organization and personnel. Forging this interaction toward a useful end is probably the

most satisfying aspect of managerial responsibility. Autonomy, recognition, and challenge are powerful tools for encouraging people to achieve the organization's purpose.

Given responsibility for controlling their own actions, people often create solutions to problems that management, as an autocracy, would never achieve. Excuses for poor performance can not be generated too easily when a supervisor has created a climate that says he wants to hear about problems and solutions and will welcome observations and suggestions. Earlier management models of workers being similar to children only really apply when workers are not acknowledged as having a responsibility to the task and a stake in the rewards of goal achievement. Work can come to a complete halt in his absence if a supervisor has to check each step in a task. Some workers become rebellious and refuse to do more than they have to under such pressure. Other employees call on the supervisor for all decisions and plans. Workers who feel that they have a personal stake in the purpose of the organization get more done – hence, the success of profit sharing plans where the organizational output is a tangible product.

When employees are encouraged to suggest ways to achieve goals and improve organizational efficiency, management must make a concerted effort to recognize the value of those suggestions. Communication – a two-way process – frequently keeps problems from developing or from becoming worse. The person immediately involved with any task often sees the problem and/or its solutions first. A supervisor with an open door or open mind encourages the flow of information. Flow of information provides the edge in many cases. People also need to know that what they are doing is perceived as useful or not useful, of high or low quality. If "nobody up above cares," pretty soon, nobody anywhere cares.

Formal performance appraisals and awards are an absolute necessity. People like to know that they can be singled out for special thanks. A simple word of praise or acknowledgment upon the completion of a task encourages people to put forth their best effort on a day-to-day basis. By making sure that he keeps in touch with employees through meetings, as well as in one-on-one conversations, the manager can be better assured that he will find out about work-related problems as well as personnel problems affecting work. While the supervisor is not a career counselor or therapist, many problems can be handled just by the fact that they are stated and that two people consider options in their solutions. More and more frequently, organizations are discovering that an interest in employee health and welfare produces increased productivity and employee longevity. Sponsoring child care and employee health support is a way of recognizing that the personality of the employee is as important to the organization as in the health of the equipment with which the employee works. No assembly line supervisor would forget to have his machinery oiled, and no computer complex technician would allow his machines to go without air conditioning. Large organizations and factories can sponsor day care facilities and health fairs or physicals. Managers in small organizations can take time to find out how these matters are affecting their employees and can offer suggestions or provide a connection to resources that their employees might use.

Having given the employee some say in his job and having recognized his contributions, as well as his need as a human being, the manager's most exciting people job is to present challenges to his employees. While some people like routine, many people become less effective when a task becomes monotonous. Job rotation can help obviate this problem. Allowing the worker to be trained to move within the organization can keep him in the organization and challenged by new tasks. Employees can be invited to brainstorming sessions about task objectives and solutions. They can be given responsibility for following a project from start to finish with periodic reports to management on progress. More complex tasks should be added for an employee who shows an interest in being given more to do.

Interrelated to all aspects of planning and personnel management, but especially to challenge for employees and to the realistic approach to a task, is the concept of flexibility. When various people within an organization are trained to do several different jobs, they are constantly learning and thinking about new things, thereby preventing boredom and stagnation. Each individual's approach to a task contributes fresh ideas and rechecks the process put in effect by other people who have done that job. The organization is protected against the loss of the skills of any one employee and receives the benefits of the varied approaches of each individual to the task. Flexibility also applies as an organizational attribute that enables people and resources to be reapplied when an original plan, however complete, goes awry, perhaps because it was faulty in the first place or because circumstances (i.e., the market) may have changed. When flexibility is seen as a goal, then the organization (and its people) will not be unduly alarmed by change or by unavoidable problems. Dynamics, after all, are stimulating and often result in a better situation.

While the organization and its people are often stimulated by goals and challenges, an often overlooked motivator is a sense of cooperation and unity in the workplace. Here the manager usually sets the tone. If challenge and competition are emphasized too much, the organization becomes stressed. A sense that excellence will be rewarded is good and most people are willing to recognize outstanding achievement. However, the manager should see to it that the individuals who carry out tasks which provide the base of a work center's task are rewarded for the excellent maintenance of that base. This consideration can become important, for example, in an organization where some people keep track of a huge data bank which provides the information that one or two individuals use to write a significant report. When congratulations or awards are handed out, each individual who had a share in the task should be acknowledged in some proportion to his contribution.

A sense of cooperation keeps more people working well. The manager should let his subordinates know that "the squeaky wheel" does not get any of the greater attention simply because he is squeaky. People who see grandstanding getting all the managerial attention will either take up that distracting habit themselves or will quietly leave an organization physically or, worse, mentally. Often the manager has no idea why "people are leaving." No loss of productivity occurs and much less turnover results when the workplace is exciting in its goals but cooperative in its methods of attaining those goals.

In summary, then, a manager is responsible for a plan, an ordered meshing of the goals of the organization and its people to achieve that task. A sense of the goal, a high-level approach to the fulfillment of that goal, and a realistic application of resources to its achievement will focus the organization on the task. Communicating to the people within the organization the message that they are responsible for that task, that they are seen as important contributors to the task achievement, and that there are always challenges ahead will keep people involved and useful within the organization. Organizational and individual flexibility and cooperation provide security for organizations and individuals in the face of change and provide the dynamic atmosphere that promotes personnel and task creativity.

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