

Feeling included

Organizations that reap the most capacity from their workforce create a feeling of being included. Imagine a large circle of like-minded members of the workforce – members who look for opportunities to find and solve problems for the organization and its customers.

For a variety of reasons, some employees don't feel included in this kind of circle. They don't look for problems to solve. In fact they may intentionally avoid finding problems and may even engage in covering up problems that do surface. Beware, these cover-ups are often a first hint that customer/co-worker service and satisfaction will be on the decline.

These characteristics are the hardest cycles to reverse. It takes the earnest effort of supervisors to detect low-capacity behaviors because they are discretionary in nature.

So, what can be done to encourage workers to step into the circle that puts them at risk – the circle that makes them visible and vulnerable? Don't ignore their efforts to do the right thing. Encourage any effort to find and solve problems for the organization and its customers. When any effort is ignored, the negative fantasy will be a resounding retreat to an outside-the-circle place of less visibility, less vulnerability and less capacity.

Once the higher-capacity circle is an acknowledged fact in organizational life, there is a next step. There has got to be a hierarchy that supports the progression from initial entry into the circle to some place up the ladder. This elevation to a higher position (formal or informal) must be based on some aspect of talent, skill, knowledge or ability. There are plenty of outlets for this progression. The formal organization structure is one avenue, but not the only one.

Teams have structures that enable people to demonstrate their talent, gain visibility, exercise limited authority and generally progress without official advancement. Some participants will be looking for the top positions, others will be quite satisfied with a place of value on a worthwhile team. Advancement is a delicate progression. Positive recognition in these efforts is essential. A public hint of failure may end up with a hurried exit down the ladder and out of the high-capacity circle, and back to the discretionary decisions that drain an organization of vitality.

On the positive side, artful leaders recognize and take advantage of the opportunity being pursued. This is, after all, the stage of organization maturity where those discretionary

barriers to high capacity can be dealt a severe blow.

This brings those in the circle and on the ladder to a point of comfort with their contribution to the organization's goals. From the higher vantage point, the high capacity employee will be more open in opinions about and pursuit of organization priorities.

This new comfort with open thinking and an open exchange of ideas breeds innovation like a breath of fresh air. Some will welcome the changes, others will react with suspicion and hesitation. This is a natural crossroads. The investment to get to this point in an organization's maturity has been high. But here is where the dividends are paid. In this atmosphere processes are discontinued because they no longer serve the organization and its customers well.

New products emerge with the loosened resources made available by a housecleaning of expensive cobwebs. Those who have been waiting for a sign that their value is a sum of their efforts, not simply a subtotal of doing as they are told, will respond enthusiastically.

For five years I've reviewed the applications submitted from some of the Best Places to Work in Hampton Roads. There have been many clear messages that testify to the distinction between mediocre and magnificent. The one resounding quality I've distilled from the experience is the profound circle people often refer to as a "feeling of family" – the ladder talked about as people describe the "opportunity" they have for a better quality of life – and the "attention" they enjoy as their ideas are valued. It occurs to me that the highest-capacity leaders sincerely extend an invitation to members of their workforce to join them in the circle on a worthwhile journey. Then those same leaders, knowing that not everyone will believe them at face value, will make themselves visible, vulnerable and ultimately more influential through broad personal contact. We need more of that.



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