

Executive Director's Letter



"Perception as Reality can Cause Employee/Employer Dissonance" by Kirk Grundahl

I've heard the following said many times during my years in business when visiting with other business owners:

- "Business would be a lot of fun if I didn't have to deal with employee problems."
- "I wish every employee we have could experience running a small business for awhile. It would really help them understand our business better."
- "I've come closer to bankruptcy due to employee problems than any other business problem I have ever encountered."
- "Transacting business becomes easy-putting the right team of individuals together is the hard part. If you do, then it gets even harder keeping the team pulling the rope in the same direction. Selfishness is a business killer."

As a former employee who visited with fellow employees, I've also heard:

- "My manager always takes credit for the work that I do, and he advances his/her career on my hard work."
- "I've found that the hard work and long hours I put in pay no rewards at all, so why should I do more than anyone else here, especially when the owners come in at 10 a.m. and leave at 3 p.m.?"
- "What the owners say and what they do are never the same. It is hard to know what to believe because it changes depending on the day."

Perception becomes reality with far too many people. The real question is how best to bridge the gap so a team can be put together and any misperceptions set straight.

At our company, we have tried our best to make sure people are happy, and if they are not, we would like to know about it as soon as possible so we can correct any problems that exist and keep the team intact. Because our business sells time, we are completely dependent on individuals and their work time to succeed. For every day that goes by, we have invested heavily in intellectual capital that is not easily transferred to someone else. If a person leaves, the loss to us is very great.

Recently, one of our staff members gave us a two-week notice. This was particularly troubling because we had held quite positive discussions with this employee in the preceding six months before receiving the letter of resignation. We also felt that there was a good understanding with this person that if there was a desire to leave, we needed time to hire someone and train them on the tasks that were being done for our customers; and that this is typically not a two-week process. We also thought that there was a good understanding that we would work hard to successfully help the individual change an existing career path. Finally, we had built some of our strategic plans around this person.

Then, unexpectedly, we received the two-week notice while both Suzi and I were out of town. Clearly, we were extremely disappointed for a variety of reasons, with the most important being this employee's clear lack of trust of us and our commitments to work through any dissatisfaction so that there would be win-win outcomes for the employee and for us as employers.

As we later learned, this individual had the perception that there was not going to be any room for advancement into areas of our business that they had wanted to grow into. This perception was not accurate, yet our desire to have open communication to ensure satisfaction failed and such perceptions became a reality for this employee upon which decisions were made.

The situation made us painfully aware that there may always be a lack of understanding and misperception even though we are working hard to not have that be the case. We are going to do our best to make sure that there is even better communication in the future. We have been conducting weekly staff meetings, which have helped communication. We are also going to have more formal planning sessions with each staff member to ensure that they are going in the direction that most benefits their career, that they are doing work that they enjoy and are good at, and that our customers will highly value the work that they are doing.

I'd like to say that there are simple answers to personnel questions, but there are not. This is absolutely the most challenging aspect of any business - hiring the right people and putting together a synergistic team. We are closer to this now than we have ever been, and this is exciting for all of us, because business is most fun when this is truly the case.

It is our hope that all who read this feel good about the business teams they are playing on. We hope each team member knows his/her role in the success of the business and works each minute with passion and energy on behalf of your customers that pay all the bills. If your business team embodies this spirit then you are absolutely assured business success and everyone becomes a winner - the team, the business and most importantly, your customers. What more could be asked for?

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