MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Development

From the Editor

Talk to a raging optimist and they will tell you there is no such thing as a problem. A problem, they declare, is only an opportunity in work clothes. Cute. On the other hand, a pessimist is likely to tell you all we have are problems, each more thorny than the previous. Frightening. Most of the time, I live somewhere between Cute and Frightening on the road to the Future. I have both opportunities and problems; some days I have more of one than the other. I don't have trouble talking about problems as problems. Maybe that's because I don't think of problems as necessarily nasty.

That having been said, I do want one thing with respect to problems: I want a higher quality problem to solve tomorrow than I have today. How do I grow with stability is a higher quality problem to have than how do I survive … how do I get everyone understanding the complexity of a changing marketplace is a higher quality problem to have than how do I improve the call answering system. You get the idea.

At LIVE Consultants Inc. we help you with the problems *and* opportunities that you have and work to ensure that you have better problems to solve in the future.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

In the last decade and a half, a lot of emphasis has been placed on developing the people that we have: workshops, seminars, forums, performance management systems, coaching, job shadowing, special assignments, and mentoring have all been part of the tactics to increase the effectiveness of our people.

The author wonders whether a similar effort should be made relative to how we recruit and select the talent we need. "If we did that," he writes, "we would spend less time hoping for miracles in classrooms, workshops, and other developmental opportunities."

Stephen offers four suggestions of what we should be thinking about before we start recruiting and hiring.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.

Stephen Baetz

Getting a Better Starting Point

There's an old piece of sage advice that says, "You can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse." If I had to guess, the originator was reflecting in limits; it's not always possible to change the fundamental quality of the raw material. The legacy of the sow's ear observation is that, in the past, many teachers, many parents, many managers assumed that spending time on the development of people who initially presented themselves as "ears" was a waste of time, effort, and money. So they dedicated themselves to "purses" and proved themselves to be right: talented people, well encouraged, continued to be talented people.

Research prompted us to think differently about the issue as it introduced the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy: expect a lot, get a lot or expect a little and get a little. Early experiments in classrooms challenged the "can't turn ears to purses" assumption. Teachers were given a group of children of random abilities and were told that they were high-performing individuals and, sure enough, they scored well from that point forward. Likewise, if teachers were told that the class was a group of low-performing individuals, the scores dropped like a stone. The outcomes from this type of research caused the pendulum to swing: you could turn sow's ears to silk purses.

The swing to the other side was encouraged by individuals who told stories about significant people in their lives who encouraged and supported them. As a result, they were able to contribute more than they thought possible for themselves and certainly more than others may have expected. The firm conclusion from research and from experience was that *labels disable*.

Somehow or other in all of this, we made a leap of logic and came to the unspoken conclusion that you can turn *all* sow's ears into silk purses! We might have been encouraged to draw that conclusion by motivational speakers who told us stories, as wondrous as miracles, of individuals who created possibilities for themselves that no one thought was feasible. Added to that, was a sense of egalitarianism and propriety that crept into the workplace that encouraged us to offer development opportunities to everyone without distinction. (And yes, it was and is the right thing to do because we don't have perfect ways to predict who will integrate the learning and take off on the road to Silkpursedom).

As you know, I've spent my career creating learning processes that develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge people will need to be successful and to make outstanding contributions. I say that so I am not misunderstood when I declare that we should be spending more time ensuring that the right people are recruited and selected. If we did that, we would spend less time hoping for miracles in classrooms, workshops, and other developmental opportunities.

This is not an argument for a pendulum swing. I am staking a claim for balance; we need to be as wise in our thinking and planning about how we recruit, hire, and orient as we are in how we grow and develop. If those issues are addressed well, we can end up with a higher quality problem to solve: how do we retain and keep challenged all the skilled, focused, creative people we have.

What I'd like to do, therefore, is make a modest contribution to what we ought to be thinking about when we recruit and select.

Suggestion 1: Connect to the Strategic Thinking

Most organizations these days have some type of strategic plan, either explicitly stated or communicated informally. The essential elements are a definition of what business the organization is in, how it wants to be recognized by key stakeholders in the future, what it values, how it will win the future, and what the priorities are. Understand those statements and their implications and an emerging profile of what the organization requires and who will do well in it should unfold. If that information is coupled with where the organization is in its life cycle, you can figure out whether people are needed who thrive on making change, can live with ambiguity, and desire new challenges or whether people are

needed who want order and consistency, will sustain processes, and who are meticulous. Or should the organization look for people who will make risky independent decisions or for those who cooperate, compromise, and collaborate? The answers to these questions — and a host of others — are not singular, of course. No organization would do well with people who all have the same skill sets or propensities. When the mix is understood, better recruiting and hiring plans can be made.

Suggestion 2: Define Who Won't and Who Will Make It

If an organization takes the time to understand who quits and who was terminated as well as the reasons for those departures, it can improve the definition in the emerging profile of who will do well (as I described in the first suggestion) as well as what might be changed when recruiting and selecting.

   When this piece of research is done, you'll hear people say such things as, "I didn't know they had an expectation that I would be mobile," or "They told me the organization was innovative, which I interpreted as developing new products for new markets, and what they wanted was a process engineer who would tinker on occasion with a couple of steps on a process flow chart." Those pieces of input can be useful in rethinking the profile or the process — as long as the input isn't minimized or written off because of frustration with someone who came and left prematurely.

   In parallel to doing an analysis of why seemingly good people have left early, determine the profile of who has done well and the reason for their success: why are they such a good match, what steps were followed when they were recruited and hired, what messages were they given, what keeps them contributing to the level that they are, etc.

Suggestion 3: Determine Where You Won't Compromise

There's no such thing as a perfect employee (thank heavens because it would make it so

difficult on the rest of us mortals); as a result, we should abandon any hope that we will find one, let alone a dozen. Therefore, in any recruitment and hiring process however well-designed it is, we won't find people who have it all. We will have to make choices and settle for someone who is less than perfect. However, we should define where we will not compromise, where we will refuse to settle. For instance, if change resilience is a must-have ability, then we can't settle for someone who doesn't have that capacity or a track record in that area. And if an ability to build enduring relationships is a must-have, we can't settle for someone who can't do that.

Suggestion 4: Look for More than Attitude

Attitude is important to accomplishment; no doubt about that. It is not the only factor.

   You would think that those two statements are obvious to everyone. They aren't. There are lots of people who declare, "Give me a positive attitude and I can give them everything else they will need to be successful." Perhaps that statement is made because that person has dealt with people who have not been positive and they know how exhausting it is to bring them back from the dark side. Or maybe they see themselves as one of the marvellous magicians who can turn positive sow's ears into silk purses. Whatever the reason may be for someone to make the assertion, don't believe it. A positive attitude needs to be accompanied by a range of skill sets (from technical to interpersonal to administrative to conceptual) and knowledge. Experience can help too when judgement is critical.

   So make attitude part of what you look for and balance it with skills, knowledge, and experience.

And Yes …

Once the recruitment and hiring process is complete and a person has been hired, managers own the responsibility to ensure development opportunities take place and the individual has every opportunity to achieve.

If You Want to Get Everybody on the Same Page …

You First Have to Get Their Elbows on the Tabletop.

You can't do what you don't get.
Lots of organizations have good strategies. But excellence is in the execution. Every employee, every team, must implement flawlessly. To do that, they need to get the big picture. Everyone must get it.

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is an easy-to-administer learning process that helps everyone *get it*. As a result of participating in a dialogue, employees align their effort with the direction of the organization and are more change-ready.

Tabletop Dialogues
centre on a large information-rich visual that is placed on a table and explored by a group of 8 people. A facilitator leads the group in a focused dialogue and helps the group draw conclusions about the challenges and opportunities the organization is facing.

Tabletop Dialogues
start with members of senior management determining the key issues facing the organization. Hard data are assembled and transformed into information-rich tables, charts, and graphs that become incorporated into the visual.

Tabletop Dialogues
engage the hearts and minds of every employee in the issues facing the business.

In the end …
Everyone gets it! Then the elbows come off the table and everyone leaves the room ready to work on what is really important to organizational success.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.

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