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Organizational Success

From the Editor

Helen Keller made this observation: "We can do anything we want if we stick to it long enough." With that assertion and with the example of her life, she made the case for persistence and tenacity. Track the experience of people who have accomplished much and you can't help but believe that persistence and tenacity are key ingredients for success.

Desire and hard work alone, however, are insufficient. Skill, knowledge, and a clear set of goals are the other keys.

At LIVE Consultants we help individuals and teams build their skills, acquire new knowledge, and set clear targets. Couple that with persistence and tenacity and the possibility for success increases dramatically.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Few people argue with the idea that we have to carefully think through how we recruit and select new people for our organization. In many cases the process is well defined and robust. Training programs are offered to help us ask questions that will assist us in understanding the candidate's track record. Decision tools are put at our disposal so we can compare one individual to another and, thereby, find the best available candidate.

In this article, Stephen declares that "As leaders, we should spend as much time thinking about the environment we are bringing people into as we spend finding the right people." His assumption is that if we do that we will have fewer failures by perfectly talented people. He suggests five areas that leaders should consider when they think about their work environment.

Stephen is a partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Define the Work Environment

Maybe it's the kind of stuff I'm reading these days but it seems to me that every writer has a undeniable desire to trace their thoughts and ideas either back to an ancient and revered dynasty in China, or to Zeus and his buddies, or even to the legends of the middle and dark ages. Perhaps this is a way for the author to marshal credibility for an argument or to prove to the reader that they are widely read.

Presumably we are to draw the conclusion that the author is clued in, clever, and credible.

Referencing the ancients and their stories has cachet. So how, as a writer, can I resist doing the same? I would hate to be left in the dust, coughing and spitting out ideas that haven't acquired the respectability of antiquity.

And so, to the unicorn — that legendary, mythical creature that looks like a horse with a lion's tail and a single, spiral horn growing out of its forehead. No ordinary critter, the unicorn. It's a marvellous beast that was not born of human fears: fierce yet noble, selfless yet solitary, and always mysterious and stunningly beautiful. For the most part, unicorns symbolized chastity, purity, cleanliness, and honesty. Who wouldn't want to be associated with a unicorn, or two, or three? After all, their horns either had a magical capacity to cure or they transformed themselves into horns of plenty. Trouble was, a unicorn could only be captured by a virgin.

So what does a unicorn have to do with life in modern organizations?

We still hunt them. Sorry. Today we use more civilized terminology. We "recruit and select" them. This is done in eager anticipation that the noble values and abilities that they have can be harnessed for the constructive use of the organization. We hope that some of our team will be inspired by them and raise their standard of performance; others may aspire to be just like them and, even if not born to be one, they might start walking like, talking like, and acting like one.

We hire unicorns, I suspect, because we are told to do so. "Hire the best," we are counselled by those who appear to know, "if you want to improve the quality of your team and of the organization." The assumptions

in that assertion are several: that there are a lot of unicorns to be found, that no one else is hunting them, that unicorns are capable of making an entire team or organization different, and that unicorns are capable of surviving in captivity.

Here's the problem I have; I don't think that those assumptions are solid. Are there many unicorns? My hunch is they are as rare as people with IQs over 160 and maybe as difficult to relate to. Sure there are some. But not a lot. I also think that since many of us have heard the same counsel to hire the best, that few are roaming and available. And, if legend is right, there's nothing worse, for a unicorn, than the loss of its freedom; they are so proud that they could not survive the captivity of processes, policies, procedures, practices, protocols, and yes, politics.

The more useful advice might be either "Hire the best available" or "Hire the best for the situation." Which means we'll get "green alligators and long-necked geese, some humpty backed camels and some chimpanzees" in our organizational zoos ... and that will be just fine.

It still means that when you're hiring long-necked geese you find the best available for the situation: same with the humpty backed camels, the chimps, and green alligators.

To be clear, the process of finding and selecting the best available for the situation should be a rigorous one that leaders and managers take seriously — from the point of defining what you want the person to accomplish to drafting a responsibility map, from finding people capable of being successful to hiring them, from orienting them to the organization to setting expectations.

That having been said, the point that I want to make is this: as leaders, we should spend as much time thinking about the environment we are bringing people into as we spend finding the right people. If we don't do that, perfectly skilled and talented people will either fail and leave or, worse yet, fail and stay. When the frustration of churn or the frustration of not achieving expected results sets in, the cry from members of the leadership team often turns to

“Find me a unicorn!” The expectation is that such a noble specimen will be able to “change things around here.” However, the reality is that an organization is stronger than any one individual and even the best unicorn can’t change an organization and usually not even a team in a timely manner.

So what should leaders consider when they think about the environment of their organization? Here’s what I’d suggest:

Reconsider how you think about an organization.

The organization isn’t its people, as some would like to assert. An organization is a set of systems that link people with product with services with customers with tools, with technology with suppliers with assets with, you get the idea. Therefore, leaders ought to understand how the systems operate — what the web of cause-effect relationships are, what causes disconnects and distractions, what barriers exist, what causes dysfunction, what works well, what roles other systems play, the list goes on. Systemic knowledge helps leaders make choices about what ought to be changed, what can be changed, and what should be left alone.

If you think about an organization as merely a collection of people, you end up with the impression that work environments can be changed by simply bringing in the right unicorns. By contrast, viewing organizations as systems demands that everything that can affect an organization’s performance is put on the table. And that gives you a chance to shape a more productive environment.

Examine how recognition works.

There’s little doubt in my mind that what gets recognized gets done. If you want to improve a work environment, therefore, look at all the formal and informal methods by which recognition is delivered. Such an examination should reveal contradictions and gaps and from there, leaders can determine what needs to be changed so that the outcomes, that are

deemed to be important, can be achieved readily.

Assess the nature of leadership communication.

Leaders in the messages they deliver help people understand what the priorities are, what is really valued, what the business challenges are, what should be embraced, and what should be abandoned. Once you know what the messages are, determine whether they are complete and appropriate for the outcomes that have to be achieved. If they’re not, determine what ought to be communicated so the work environment of the organization is positive and healthy.

Determine how well everybody understands the issues of the business.

If people can’t tell you what the issues of the business are — what challenges the marketplace presents, what creates customer or employee satisfaction, how money gets made, what role technology plays, how the organization operates, what resources are and are not available — they are likely to create a work environment that is reluctant to change, where everyone stands around waiting to be told what to do. When people understand the business, they create work environments to deal with the problems and challenges that are in front of them.

Define who and what are needed for the organization to be successful.

If you know how the organization works, how recognition happens, what messages leaders are sending, and what the business issues are, you are in a position to define *what* is needed and *who* is needed for success. Articulate what values are essential, what processes are vital, what assets are required, what competencies must exist, what relationships must be built, and yes, how many green alligators, long-necked geese, humpy backed camels, and chimpanzees are required.

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