

» BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN YOUR PEOPLE EMPOWERING EMPLOYEES TO EXECUTE

Organizational expectations continue to raise the issues of: getting more sales, satisfying more customers, and becoming more profitable. “More” is continually being added to the plate, and people are expected to do it all, and do it well – no excuses accepted. In this demanding environment, employees either attempt to “do it all” and fail or burnout. Or, they decide to pick-and-choose what activities they do because they know that they can’t possibly complete the “whole” list. The end result is usually the same – more does not happen and everyone loses!

This scenario leads one to ask the question: “Why are businesses continually setting their people, and thus themselves, up to fail?” The answer to this question is not a simple one, yet it has its “roots” in innocent assumptions made through basic business decisions. It generally takes the shape of staff reductions, with the remaining employees expected to assume the tasks of the “reduced” employees. It is that “one little extra...report, meeting, task force, or goal” that ends up crowding employees’ plates, and causing work over-load. As the pile on their plates continue to add up, employees find that attitudes drag, balls are dropped, expectations are not met, and performance lags. To top it all off, management’s typical response is: “...if only the employees could learn to prioritize their time better...!”

Time management is not the real issue here; it is that management does not accept the reality that individuals have capacity limits. The more we push beyond those limits, the less creative the work and the lower the quality. If management wants to garner the best performance from their people, they must coach them to prioritize, and help them to understand what decisions need to be made in relationship to their prioritization. A time management course – by itself – is not the answer. While a course can establish a solid foundation for employees, as well as provide various time management techniques, only management can develop an individual’s ability to think and make the right choices based on their organization’s goals and strategies. If employees are provided the necessary front-end guidance and continually coached to make quality decisions, prioritization failure can be avoided and success can be achieved.

The first step to successful prioritization is setting clear expectations. Management themselves must be very clear on the importance and criticality of each goal and/or strategy. Without this knowledge, they have no chance of providing guidance for their employees in making their own quality decisions. Management must check for understanding on a regular basis by asking clarifying questions and helping employees to understand the issue of “what is in it for them.”

This begs the question: “How can management get employees to prioritize their time appropriately?” Simply helping employees understand what types of choices they have, and making them feel empowered to make those choices can answer this. The following list is a brief synopsis of the typical choices they will be faced with:

Delegate the task to someone else. Many people are heroic and do not want to give tasks with which they are comfortable or from which they gain great satisfaction – even if someone at a lower level could and should be doing them.

Lower the quality. Not all tasks need to be done at a level “10” quality. It takes a disproportionate amount of time and may not be worth the extra effort to reach “10” quality consistently.

Outsource the task. Some tasks, although traditionally performed internally, may be accomplished more economically outside the organization. Internal resources may then be focused on high value initiatives that cannot be outsourced.

Lower the frequency. Many times a pattern of frequency is developed when, in actuality the frequency of the task adds no value. An example of this is report generation. Be sure that when something is requested, it is being productively utilized.

Stop doing the task. Many times, technology or a change in work processes has antiquated a task. Challenge the value of every task before assuming it is important, and needs to be continued. There are huge opportunities in giving people permission to challenge the necessity of a particular task. “Let go of the old, and trust in the new.” Organizations cannot afford to have an old system in place when a better one has been created.

Do the task a different way. We operate out of a belief system that says, “I am most efficient when I do a task this way.” Therefore, we resist change as well as learning to do it differently. We must always look for ways to do a task better – or at least more efficiently.

These choices are simple, yet they can have huge implications – depending on which choices an employee makes. Due to the possible implications of these choices, most managers are afraid to let employees make their own decisions on how best to spend their time. However, if they do not give employees the power to make decisions, they are forcing them to live in an environment where they are expected to do everything well, on time, and at the frequency demanded. Typically, management has set employees up for failure and then they wonder why these same employees burnout, and why good employees are lost.

Test yourself: Ask your direct reports what they believe you expect from them. See how closely it matches with what you think is most important. Ask them how they are making decisions to spend their time, and how that maximizes their ability to meet your expectations. Do not be surprised if you hear: “I do not know.” That is a sign that you need to help and coach your employees to make the right decisions on where to spend their time and how to empower them to execute.