

LEARN OR BE LEFT BEHIND

BY ROBERT M. GIGNAC

As a consultant, I am often amused and a bit dismayed when I have opportunity to watch companies whose “talk” and “walk” are not only on different pages, they are from different books. Fortunately, I am currently doing some work with a company whose talk and walk are on the same page. During a recent discussion with some senior management types over cappuccino (Europe can be quite a civilized place to work), they shared with me some of their thoughts on preparing their employees for the future, and I suspect they are good points for you and your teams as well.

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I am fond of the phrase: “Don’t let lack of schooling get in the way of a higher education”. Our learning was not intended to be complete when the diploma was placed in our hands. That was just the end of “school”. Real-world learning requires time and effort, not all of which will be provided on the job. In order to develop professionally, we should expect to have to give up some personal time. But good companies don’t expect their employees to go it alone. If you manage people, part of your job should require you to promote employee development by creating plans for your staff to grow and learn. The marketplace today is a rapidly changing environment, which demands that we work with and adapt our skills within ever-shorter cycles. Those who are capable of being life-long ‘students’ will be those best equipped to handle this type of change.

MAKE YOURSELF CLEAR

Sometimes we make the mistake of assuming that everyone around us understands what *we* know and understand. Interesting thing that I have discovered—even the smartest people are not mind readers. A recurring theme in my work with organizations is the complaint that staff get little or no direction from above and expectations are not being clearly communicated. “If you don’t know where you are going, don’t be surprised if you don’t get there” is the thought that immediately comes to mind. Do not be fooled into thinking that your technology will save you. I have worked with firms that do not rely on technology and exhibit excellent communication, and others that have global wireless e-mail networks and suffer from a severe shortage of information sharing. The communication vision has to come from the top, if it’s not a priority for them, it won’t be a priority for anyone else.

WE ARE ALL CAPABLE OF LEADING

We cannot, or should not, expect our staff to do things we do not or will not do personally. We should not expect others to set and attain goals (and be excited about them) if we have no prescribed goals for ourselves. If we are unenthusiastic about our role, our staff will not be enthusiastic about theirs. If we do not share our information and concerns, do not expect information to be shared by others, or for them to be concerned. The spirit and approach that we take in our own jobs will have a major impact on those who work for us. We do not need the title of “Leader” on our business card or office door in order to lead—we need to have the desire to move others and ourselves forward in a positive direction. We also need to remember that we can lead even when we are following.

I TRY THEREFORE I AM

If you want to encourage and develop people, the best way is to let them take their new skills, along with a clear set of directions, and turn them loose on something new. The process of building and failing (or even breaking things) is the growth process; you cannot possibly learn anything if you do not make mistakes along the way.

If we never had tried to get back up after our first falls, we would still be crawling around on the floor today. Well run companies have a sense of “fun” and “energy” that you can sense just walking around their buildings. If there is something I have learned, it is that talented people do not like to be treated like “paint-by-number” sets. Try new stuff. Experiment. If there is no capacity for experimentation and “play”, expect to lose some of your most talented people to other firms who let them.

It wasn’t that long ago that our expectations were to join a company, work hard, stay loyal, and be taken care of. In today’s job market, that is no longer an option. The onus is on us to learn, grow, and stay marketable, because you never know what tomorrow may bring. Encourage your staff (and your friends) to do the same—it will be the best thing you can do for them. **E**

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