



Tapping Employee Potential



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Tapping Employee Potential – A Competitive Advantage

Webster's defines "potential" as, "having capacity for existence, but not yet existing; having force or power; anything that may be possible." Do my employees and I have potential? The capacity to do more? Are we motivated to do more? Do we have the opportunity to do more? According to Gallop Research, organizations utilize less than 20% of their employees' potential.

Unleashing potential necessitates change, and with change comes challenge. However, successfully working our way through challenge results in personal development and personal growth as well as higher performance and growth for the organization. We are always becoming what we are to become. Imagine what that might mean if we fill our cup to capacity.

Perhaps there is much to be learned from this long-standing story.

A man found a butterfly cocoon. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched as the butterfly struggled to squeeze its body through the tiny hole. Then it stopped, as if it could go no further. So the man decided to help. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bits of cocoon. The butterfly emerged easily. But, something was wrong! Its wings were small and shriveled. It had the potential to fly, but flight never happened. So, it spent its entire life on the floor.

For the butterfly to reach its full potential, it had to struggle through that tiny hole in order to force fluid from its body into its wings so that they would be strong enough to fly. But the struggle was cut short, the challenge was ended, and its potential to be what it could be was lost.

Develop Potential

To tap potential, concentrate on developing an individual's strengths versus trying to develop areas where they are weak. Performance reviews and development efforts too often concentrate on weaknesses. We use a list of competencies and expect performance relative to each one. If Johnny has all A's but an F in geography, we fixate on geography. Peter Drucker reminds us that "It takes far less energy to move from first-rate performance to excellence than it does to move from incompetence to mediocrity" ... and ... "A person can perform only from strength. One cannot build performance on weaknesses, let alone on something one cannot do at all."

When selecting employees for development, we often base the choice on past performance, but past performance may not be indicative of future success at higher levels. It costs a lot to develop the wrong people. Professional **Development Assessments** identify strengths and weaknesses as well as the potential to grow in the job or progress to higher levels. Objective assessment data can be used as an effective foundation for an individualized Development Plan. The ability to systematically evaluate potential also provides the organization with objective knowledge for **Talent Reviews** and **Succession Planning** and the degree to which the organization can achieve its strategic vision with the talent it currently has.

Like the butterfly, we sometimes need to struggle to achieve our potential. Perhaps too often we stifle talented, creative people with upside potential by micromanaging how they achieve outcomes, or not providing sufficient autonomy and challenges.

New assignments, outside of a person’s comfort zone and into the stretch zone, can develop potential. Through these assignments, people should be empowered to make decisions and take some risk. At the heart of empowerment should be an acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes of my decisions. Trust is built when others take a risk with me and I perform to their expectations.

Employees with potential will eventually outgrow their jobs and, at the time they do, there may not be opportunities for advancement “up the ladder.” How do we retain them? According to Beverly Kaye, author of “Up is Not the Only Way,” establishing multiple career paths – which are an alternative to the traditional vertical corporate ladder – may be one way to retain valued employees. Organizations such as Microsoft, Southwest Airlines, South Texas Veterans Health Care System, Electronic Data Systems, and others have implemented this approach.

Not everyone with potential is right for a given organization. Some employees have potential but are just not engaged or sufficiently committed to the organization. Perhaps the mission, purpose, and values of the organization are not aligned with the goals and values of the individual. This misalignment can be of particular importance to Gen Y employees. Some may have potential to advance but just don’t aspire to more senior level roles. They don’t want to make the sacrifices required, or don’t find the work-life balance they seek.

Select Potential

When initially selecting employees into the organization, it is helpful to have high quality, objective data about their strengths and development areas as well as their potential.

Potential of candidates for employment can be identified through the use of a professional **Selection Assessment** provide data about “fit” with the job and with the company’s desired culture, as well as insight into potential. Does this person have the strengths needed for this job, and does he/she have the potential to be developed for advancement to the next level. This “bench strength” of talent is of great importance given today’s aging workforce, fewer numbers coming into the workplace, and the heightened demand for talent.

Conclusion

We must continuously focus on the sometimes forgotten fact that people are not an organization’s most important asset – they are the organization. **Coach, mentor, train, and develop** them to their full, and often hidden, potential. As they achieve their potential, the organization prospers.