

## **PART 1: ARE YOUR EMPLOYEES REALLY IMPORTANT BUSINESS PARTNERS?**

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### ***OR ARE YOU JUST KIDDING?***

Most employers say they value their employees. After all, it would sound pretty harsh for an employer to say that its employees are, with a few exceptions, a bunch of idiots who can seldom do anything right. Besides, what would such a statement say about the company itself?

Aside from avoiding shooting themselves in the foot, employers who say they value employees generally believe what they are saying. But how often do employers really take the actions that prove they value employees' contributions to the business. Most of the time employees do not have any opportunity to make contributions to the business beyond performing their assigned duties. Employers who care often have high-performance organizations that excel in delivering their products or services to the intended end-user, with high levels of customer satisfaction.

Unfortunately, more frequently than is desirable, an employer's claim about how it values its employees doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Why? Because it's much easier to say it than it is to do it. The primary reason that employee contributions are cut off at the expected and routine level is that it is very, very difficult to treat your employees as valued business partners on a consistent and habitual basis.

It's much easier, and (apparently) more efficient in the short run, to issue directives about what has to be done, when it has to be done, and how it has to be done, so that management can spend more time worrying about the slow pace of change and

the ever increasing inroads of the competition. As Harry Truman correctly said: "When you have an efficient government, you have a dictatorship." We believe the same holds true in business, although efficiency alone is no more a reason to embrace the dictatorship model in commercial activity than in the governance of nations. We prefer Winston Churchill's choice between efficiency and democracy: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others."

## **ARE YOU WILLING TO TAKE THE TIME?**

Certainly the pace of modern business, the challenges of local and world competition do not leave a great deal of time for theoretical discussions of work place enrichment, consensus building or structural organizational development. Often those considerations seem like luxuries for another day when the pace slows a little. Right now we have to get our costs down and our manufacturing improved, we have to figure out how to get better performance from our suppliers and how to improve our customer satisfaction scores, and we also have to figure out how to retain our market share against other lower cost competitors, etc.

While there is never enough time, fortunately you don't have to change your organization in a week, a month or a year. But it is important, if you wish to make a better use of the resource for which you pay considerable sums each week, to assess where you are on the employee-involvement curve, and to decide for yourself whether it is worth the time and effort to try to make care and respect for employees a more obvious and central part of your operation. Stated another way, you have to do the analysis – and leadership has to make the decision – whether or not the investment of time, resources and effort of developing a closer relationship between employees and management is an objective the business wishes to pursue.

It is important that this decision not be taken lightly because, once you start down the path of greater employee participation and involvement, employee perceptions of deviation from that course are likely to cause strong negative reactions. If there is not the will to persevere, to stay the course until you succeed, and the commitment to continue the effort even after you are succeeding, it's better not to begin at all and to just continue paying lip service to the corporate commitment to employee involvement.

That's all the space we have for this topic right now, but in the next issue we'll take a look at some specifics about what it means to treat employees as valued business partners.