CIRCUSES AND OPERAS – PART 2

ABSTRACT
Redefining management's role and achieving the best from employees

M. A. Kowalchuk, PMP, CET
Sr. PM, Sr. CM

Circuses and Operas – Part 2

The Circus, Part 1

See Circuses and Operas – Part 1

The Opera, Part 2

I believe a paradigm shift is required for companies who wish to obtain the best effort from employees. Can we agree with my definition of an *opera*? It is a focused group of individuals assembled to perform specific tasks with a defined goal based on their expertise. Given the foregoing definition, in conjunction with the workplace, what can managers do to attain these results from employees?

In this example, please see the third example of part 1 regarding the president's actions.

In another example, as project manager, I believe in setting the expectations and goals from the start. On an industrial project, I have all employees, subcontractors and the client's management team assembled for the kick-off meeting. I read "The Arena" by Theodore Roosevelt. Then I state my expectations, and ask everyone to focus on safety and efficiencies, not to be concerned with money as I manage that aspect.

At this particular kick-off, I asked each person to look left then right, to see the people on either side. Theoretically, one of the three would be hurt. I asked the question, "If you get hurt or worse, who takes care of you and your family?" I then stated that not a single spade, not a shovel full, not a 798-haul truck, not a month, not a year worth of production was worth anyone being injured. I explained that, as the project progressed, conditions would change and new hazards could present themselves. The crews were to be vigilant and address these situations every time they returned to their work locations, and as required thereafter. I asked them to buy into this mindset and waited for their response. Then stated, if they accepted work under these terms, I would buy them lunch every Saturday.

I reinforced my strategy by walking the talk. Every day I walked work zones and strove to dissolve the management / craft barrier. At opportune moments, I spoke with personnel, starting with non-work-related topics then coming around to their thoughts on the work and what could be done differently improved results. Based on their response, I asked them to pass their valued ideas up the chain of command for action. Another step I took was talking with frontline staff supervisors, stating that, "As projects go, you may get frustrated and stressed at times." When these moments occur, come and get me and we'll go for a drive." They could vent without repercussion, we would talk through the issues and then go back to work.

This project had a unique problem in that building roads and overpasses under live operating systems that could not be shut down without bringing the entire oil sands facility to a standstill (you can imagine the economic impact of bringing down an oil sands facility). The client had nine different potential plans and chose what they thought to be the best even though it did not have an engineered solution and no one had any idea how the work was to be completed.

I love challenges, particularly when everybody believes something is impossible. I assembled key members of the team and subcontractors for a meeting. In one afternoon, we explored and worked the problem, and drafted solutions. We then set about hiring third-party engineering for our design

solutions, the special safety procedures were written in addition to an extensively detailed execution plan, reviewed by everybody. As a team, we stepped through the entire execution process so everybody knew what to do and when. The work came together as planned without a single problem. The project motto became "600 Character Building Meters, 600 Meters of Fun."

Another example involves an industrial project already underway with poor safety and productivity. The previous project manager and construction manager were reassigned before my involvement. For the first couple of days I did nothing but observe as I reviewed all submitted behavior-based cards for trends to ascertain how the field-level hazard assessment forms (FLHAs) were being used, in addition to other company policies and processes.

I discovered two things: superintendents had taken the responsibility away from general foremen for toolbox talks and were rewriting (copying) the same statement from one day to the next (not company policy, or procedure). Secondly, crews were using the shotgun approach to completing FLHAs (where you write all possible risks and all possible controls, hoping that one is correct).

FLHA's are a legal document and used during investigations of incidents. Companies use preformatted generalized FLHA's as a means of meeting legal requirements and theoretically enhancing productivity. These preformatted systems are not a detailed analysis of the tasks necessary for completing a given scope of work. People focus on the larger risks. An unintended consequence, the dumbing down of craft instead of training a much more knowledgeable skilled competent workforce. How many lesser risks with a compounding effect becomes a catastrophic incident?

The second step I took was assembling the project team and explaining my expectations with the steps necessary for rectifying deficiencies. In my mandate to lead by example, I sat with every crew as they performed their FLHAs, and proposed then initiated changes. All crewmembers were to be active participants of the process. When I noticed a particular crewmember hanging back, the next day this person led the writing of the FLHA.

From a subconscious and factual perspective, better safety results are achieved when everybody is involved. I forbid the use of the preformatted FLHA cards (these cards stop the thought process and could only be used as reference material). I instructed them to list all risks for the entire day by the task in one to two words, and then list the controls for the risks in one to two words. Crews experienced learning curves as they were given responsibility and accountability. My reasoning, if you cannot identify the risk from the paragraph written, you cannot identify the correct control and nobody knows what to do.

Next, I began using behavior-based observation (BBO) cards for identifying both positive and negative situations followed by testing the changes and tweaking where required. I would enter a work location and intentionally wait to see how long it took a crewmember to approach with the FLHA, review it with me and have me sign it. My signature means that I am aware of the risks, the controls and actions taken in the event of an emergency. In another test, I would intentionally remove a piece of safety gear then wait for a response from somebody. Their initial response was a visible thought process, and chilling. Statements were, "Well, you are the project manager, we cannot write you up." My response was, "If you don't write a BBO card for correcting me, I will write one on you for not correcting me." The lesson I wanted to convey was that everybody must operate by the same safety policies and procedures regardless of position. Leaders lead by example.

I also believe in taking time to celebrate success and genuinely recognizing personnel based on BBO card submissions. A discussion with the client's construction manager regarding their personnel entering work locations while refusing to sign the FLHA resulted in the mine manager issuing a directive, "Any client personnel not reviewing and signing the FLHA before entering any work zone would be immediately taken to the gate, no questions asked!"

Conclusion

Considering all the people with whom I have worked in the course of my career, five stand out as exceptional leaders with a true understanding of the role of management, understanding human nature and able to achieve exceptional results by inspiring people. I have learned from these five people, been valued, and had my ideas reinforced. They were a joy to work with, and for. I firmly believe managers need to lead, support, trust, empower, and encourage growth and achievement. Finally yet importantly, managers and leaders need to actually lead!

The lesson I learned from the first example is how great a person feels when they are really valued, trusted, empowered, given responsibility and accountability followed by the opportunity to excel. I could have leaped tall buildings!

In the second example, this group people accepted the responsibility and accountability for their safety and conduct. They were led and supported. During the project, I bought lunch every Saturday, but one. I enjoyed celebrating their success with them, witnessing their facial expressions as they dined and socialized while being recognized for outstanding work. We were party to an amazing transformation in safety and productivity recognized by the client's project manager.

In the final example, we were able to rewrite the project's safety culture and productivity completely around in approximately a month. Safety issues neared zero with our highly motived crew. We celebrated milestone achievements. To my surprise, the project was nominated and eventually received the Client's Project Safety Award when measured against every other project on site.

Finally, it is my observation, people will accept challenges and achieve great things when they are positively motived, supported, well led and given the opportunity! Such things are rare, special in these times, and much needed.