Geared for Success

The Art of Picking Your Battles

Frustrated about policies that hold you back at work? Sick of the way things are being handled? Tired of the same issues not being addressed? Aggravations are a part of every organization. As leaders, an important part of getting things done relies heavily on how we "pick our battles". When should you move from complaining to taking action? How should you decide which battles are worth fighting?

Smart leaders understand and calculate what battles are worth their time and energy. Examine your motives. Does this issue really matter from a big picture perspective? Are you able to address this issue with controlled emotions? Remember a festering frustration can quickly turn to anger which in turn-- leads to inappropriate behaviors and unclear decision-making.

In the article, "How to Pick Your Battles at Work", by Amy Gallo, the author outlines five principles to help you decide whether to take on an issue or leave it alone.

1. **Ask Yourself** – Does this issue really matter and impact the organization, your co-workers, the customer and/or people's ability to do their jobs? As you know, there are risks to going against the status quo, so make sure it is worth it. Be able to describe how fixing the issue will move your team or organization toward big picture goal and is aligned with the vision. Gallo suggests rating the importance of a problem on a scale of 1(Low)-10 (High). Issues rating below 6, she recommends dropping.

2. **Understand your Authority and Influence** – Tackling and ultimately fixing an issue requires having both a good reputation and the authority to succeed. People are more willing to accommodate change when you have proven yourself in the past and have good standings. What are your relationships like up and down the organizational chain? Think about the consequences of the exposure the battle will bring. Is it worth it?

3. **Have a Possible Constructive Solution** – Plan ahead on what ideas you bring to the table. Think about possible criticisms that others may have. Be prepared to explain the benefits of what needs to be done. Have a viable solution or plan of attack.

4. **Test for Support with Trusted Colleagues** – Bounce ideas off of those you trust. Watch and listen carefully for their reactions. Consider floating your ideas when the issue comes up naturally (e.g. after a team meeting).

5. **Enlist Supporters** – Think about who may benefit from the proposed change. Bring like-minded and some "devil's advocates" together to brainstorm possibilities. Be sure you gather others who are well respected, action-oriented, inside and outside your normal work circle. Enlisting supports will help you create a realistic plan that makes sense in a broad way.

Addressing an issue takes courage and risk. Recognize that how you present your ideas will be very important. It is especially helpful to have your boss on board. However, don't rely on him/her to wage the battle for you. Approach him/her with a well thought out plan. Understand that s/he may have a different opinion about how you should or should not proceed.

> **"You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."**
>
> Winston Churchill

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The Art of Picking Your Battles
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So when should you retreat and not take on the battle? In Sue Shellenbarger's article, "To Fight or Not to Fight? When to Pick Workplace Battles", she suggests the following situations are losing battles:

- When you want to take on the situation because you dislike the personality of the person in command of it.

- When your emotions are running high and you are unable to rationally express yourself.

- When your viable solution isn't accepted by trusted colleagues.

- When you are battling issues outside your area of influence or responsibility.

- When you cannot show direct correlation between your idea and the vision of the organization.

As leaders we have a finite amount of time at work. It is up to us to determine how we should most effectively use it. Choosing your battles involves striking a balance--determining what is really important for making an impact and what you should choose to let go. Realize that once you learn to choose your battles you will be far more effective in winning battles that are truly important to you.

> **"Any fool can criticize, complain, condemn–and most fools do. Picking your battles is impressive and fighting them fairly is essential."**
>
> Dale Carnegie

The Dreaded Email Inbox

It is Monday morning or worse yet you have just come back from vacation--Should you shout, "Avalanche!" when you open your email inbox?   It is no surprise that the number of emails received in the workplace continues to rise.   Reading, sorting and managing them can take a significant amount of your day and–your time. This tool which was supposed to simplify our work interactions often does just the opposite.

In an article for Small and Medium Businesses, HP suggests managing your inbox with three easy steps.

Step 1 – **Use email tools.** Create an effective folder structure. One model many people use is: People, Projects and Months of the Year.

Step 2 –
- **Change your email behavior.** Identify specific times during the day when you will check and file your emails. Avoid the trap of interrupting a project or conversation to check emails and get off track.

- **Use your Inbox as a To Do list.** Create a virtual to do list by keeping only those emails that contain outstanding action items in your inbox folder.

- **Touch each email only once.** Deal with new emails the moment you open them. Skimming the message and waiting until later increases the chances it will be lost or forgotten.

- M**anage your sent mail** – Copy or Blind Copy yourself on messages you'll want to refer to later.

- **Keep it clean** – Schedule a monthly clean up of emails.

Step 3 – **Establish email protocols for your organization.**

- Discourage one-word replies.

- Carefully select your distribution list. Be sure you don't include recipients who don't need your message.

- Think before you hit the Reply all button. Ask yourself – Will everyone benefit from my reply or are there just a few recipients I need to address?

- Think before sending large attachments.

- Edit emails before forwarding. Editing improves clarity and efficiency.

> **"How to write a good email: 1. Write your email. 2. Delete most of it. 3. Send."**
>
> Dan Munz (Tweet)

Leadership Challenges for 2016 and Beyond

As leaders look to the future with the start of a new year, they are faced with significant challenges. Broadening demands continue to require leaders to use their capabilities and competencies at higher levels. Leaders still need to engage and inspire others to accomplish the organization's objectives but must do so with a whole new frame of reference. At the MBTI User's Conference Sharon Lebovitz Richmond, author of Introduction to Type and Leadership, named the following challenges facing leadership today:

- The work being done is also becoming increasingly complex.

- Knowledge and expertise are distributed more widely within organizations.

- More people are managed with fewer resources (broader spans of control)

- The workforce is increasingly diverse and dispersed, often across different time zone and continents.

- The pace of change is accelerating.

- Performance expectations are escalating.

- Leadership increasingly requires the ability to influence others outside traditional hierarchical structures.

Ms. Lebovitz Richmond emphasized the importance of the basics in leadership for our work world today–building effective working relationships, communicating in transparent ways, being adaptable and open to change and making full use of each team member's abilities. These basics will help leaders to stay on course for the challenges in 2016 and the future.

What Does Your Workplace Culture Look Like?

Everyone has heard the saying that "employees leave bosses, not jobs". But it is really more complex than that. The entire leadership organization from the top–down creates a culture that is related to values such as integrity, ethics, honesty, professionalism, fairness, accountability and more. Employees clearly see when leaders demonstrate or disregard values. Organizational mismanagement contributes to disengaged, tuned-out employees with low morale. The Gallup Organization estimated that there are 32 million actively disengaged employees. This creates a estimated cost of up to $350 billion per year in lost productivity. Such losses include absenteeism, tardiness, poor work that has to be re-done, court claims, etc.

In an article titled, "The Five Causes of Low Employee Morale–And How to Avoid Them", by Drew Stevens, the author provides insight into cultural derailers.

1. Leadership not serving as exemplars
2. Little or no accountability
3. No career planning or succession planning
4. Too many silos and departmental infighting
5. Favoritism and lack of respect for the employees

Interestingly, simple actions by even one leader can make the difference to employees in an organization. Surveys show that in a basic way leaders have the power to influence and create optimistic, positive environments. This can be done through listening, caring, thanking, being consistent in actions, showing transparency and inclusiveness and valuing others with respectful actions.

Define the Meeting Purpose with Questions

Meetings, meetings, meetings. Is your day full of sitting in one meeting after another? The number 1 reason people hate attending meetings is that they have no defined purpose. To make the most of your meetings, try this method--create an agenda built around a question format. It gets people thinking before the meeting actually happens and keeps it on track once everyone is in the room. Here is how:

1. Make the meeting title a question and seek the answer in the meeting–Examples might be: "What are ways we can work better together?" "How can we better respond to our customers?" "What important actions are being taken to move forward in our department? "How should we implement…?" "What are we accomplishing as a team?"

2. Then, phrase each agenda item as a question, too. Possibilities include:
   c. How are each of us contributing to the success of the organization? (Great for Round Robin report outs)
   d. What information does headquarters need from us?
   e. What actions are we taking to provide positive outcomes for this project?

Remember, when the meeting begins to get off track, the facilitator needs to rein it in by reminding the participants about the original question being asked. Channeling the power of questions helps to keep the meeting on point, encourages team participation and avoids wasted time.

Resource: Joris Luijke, HR Blogger for Culture Hacking

"In a typical six or eight person group, three people do 70% of the talking. That translates into less than four minutes of floor time for the remaining participants during an hour-long meeting."

Leigh Thompson, author of Creative Conspiracy: The New Rules of Breakthrough Collaboration

Factors for Job Happiness

Ever wonder how to keep your employees (or yourself) happy on the job? Researchers Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham identified five factors that make a difference in job satisfaction.

- **Skill Variety** - A desired mix of skills and activities is needed to carry out the work.
- **Task Completion** - The job is undertaken as a whole, allowing the employee to complete an identifiable piece of work from beginning to end with a visible outcome.
- **Task Significance** - The job has a recognizable impact on the overall mission or on other people inside or outside the organization.
- **Autonomy** - The job offers substantial freedom, independence, and discretion in scheduling the work and in choosing the procedures to be used in carrying it out.
- **Feedback** - The job provides feedback by observable progress and results of the job itself, or from customers, coworkers and management.

Resource: The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave, by Leigh Branham
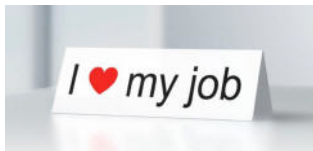
Receiving Feedback—How to get the Truth

As leaders, feedback surrounds us every minute of the day–whether we ask for it or not. Things like body language, silence, facial expressions, emails, casual statements all give us a sense of how people are responding to us. Since we grow and learn from feedback, it is important to seek it, listen attentively and pay attention to how we respond.
Below are some tips for ensuring that you receive truthful feedback and not just general niceties.

1. Think about **who** you should ask. What co-worker, subordinate, mentor or peer do you have a strong relationship with that will take a risk to be 100% truthful? Seek him/her out.
2. **How** should you ask? Be specific. Vague questions will receive vague (useless answers).
3. Plan **when** you will ask. If you want thoughtful feedback, allow time for the person to really determine what they want to say. Asking for feedback when the person has deadlines looming is or is buried in work is not good timing.
4. Decide **where** you will ask. You will receive very different feedback in a meeting room versus in a casual setting drinking coffee.
5. **How** will you respond? Listen carefully and quietly. And, as you know, the best answer after receiving feedback is "thank you".

Resource: "You Can Handle the Truth.", by Scott Berkun

> **"The most important predictor of the success of a company...was how many people answered "yes" to the question, "Do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?"**
>
> Sheryl Sandberg, COO--Facebook

Stress and Emotional Intelligence

According to national research done by Multi-Health Systems Inc., stress negatively affects the ability of workers to exhibit their full range of emotional intelligence. In this study:

- 53% of American workers said stress reduces their productivity in the workplace.
- 53% said stress hurts their relationships with co-workers.

- 47% said stress inhibits their workplace decision-making.

Managers who had higher levels of emotional intelligence reported less subjective stress and demonstrated better management performance. It also suggests that emotional intelligence may play an important role in mitigating the impact of stress.

Resource: Stress and Health, by M. Slaski and S. Cartwright

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