



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

NEGATIVE MANAGEMENT BEHAVIOURS

As a speaker and consultant in Malaysia, I have had the privilege of meeting and training managers at various levels and from various companies. In the process of doing so, I have encountered certain management attitudes and behaviors that I feel acts as an obstacle to them being able to discharge their management responsibilities effectively. In fact, these behaviors tend to negatively influence the working environment, which in turn serves to deteriorate the circumstances further, resulting in unhappy employees, poor morale, low productivity and a stressful environment for all concerned.

Below are some of the harmful behaviors I have seen managers make that can have a negative effect on the working environment.

Failure to 'Lead by Example'

Leading by example, or "walking your talk" is critical to effective leadership. You will never earn the respect of others if the examples you set are not congruent with the values that you want your staff to have, for example honesty, discipline and timeliness. The best managers practice what they preach. As an example, many Malaysian leaders and managers say they want change and continuous improvement but their actions do not match their words. These leaders' exhortations to employees ring false when their subsequent actions contradict their words. They want their staff to improve their individual competencies, but do nothing to develop themselves. In one particular experience I had, during a change process discussion in one company, one CEO actually asked me, "Do I have to change, too?" This was for me, a scary question indeed coming from someone who was adamant for his organization to change. For employees, there is nothing more powerful than observing their superiors do the actions or behaviors they are requesting from their staff. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Become the change you wish to see in the world." And, it will happen.

Communicating Poorly

Good communication means telling staff your expectations about them, your work standards and your problems. Failing to keep your staff informed or having the attitude that staff are supposed to know is a clear step towards poor performance at the workplace. 'Expecting them to know' is a very unsafe notion to have as people have different opinions, views and values about work. I have on many occasions observed managers give instructions like, 'Do the report' and nothing else. Questions from the recipient are then disregarded with the statement, "Surely you know how to do a report". When the report is then submitted a few days later, the manager throws a tantrum and makes statements like, "why is the introduction so short, why have you not put in charts and tables, why have you not quoted examples". My contention is shouldn't all these have been communicated before the report is made? It would have saved time, effort and importantly prevented the de-motivation of the report maker.

A significant factor in communications is 'good listening', a skill I feel many managers lack. Malaysian managers seem to prefer the 'you listen to me as I am the boss' syndrome. As much as you want them to know how you feel, they would also want you to know how they feel. Good listening will enable managers to really be aware of the problems of subordinates and importantly, enable them to get feedback on work activities. This will then to a large extent enable them to take action to improve operations, procedures, policies and customer care.

Failure to Train and Develop Staff

Well-trained employees at all levels of your organization are integral to achieving your business objectives and raising your business performance. Your staff need up-to-date skills and best practice methods to do their jobs efficiently and effectively. This skill and knowledge building process is an important and valuable ongoing investment in your business.

Many Malaysian managers make the assumption that their staff will eventually "catch-on" or will automatically get to know their job through a process of time. Yes, this is possible, but learning through experience is a very slow way of learning. Training helps to accelerate this learning process. I believe managers must spend at least 25% of their time coaching and training their staff. Even a person like Meg Whitman, the CEO of E-Bay, admits, "My weakness is that I haven't done enough day to day coaching and mentoring"

I have on many occasions met CEO's and MD's who tell me 'It's no use spending money training staff because as soon as they get the skills, they will want to leave to join another company.' My answer in the form of a question is usually, "What if you don't train them and they do not leave to join another company?" There is always a risk that staff after being trained may take these skills elsewhere, but the greater risk I believe is for us not to train them and thus have untrained incompetent subordinates.

Motivating by Fear

This seems to be the favorite motivation method used by Malaysian managers. Motivating by fear seems easy, as the results are instantaneous. When a manager barks, "If I don't see the report on my table by 9 am tomorrow, I am going to sort you out", there is a good chance the report will be on the table the next morning. As the response is in line with the command and it was 'easy', hence the preference for this method. But fear only works short term. Fear will cause people to retaliate negatively in the form of poor quality and quantity of work, absenteeism, apathy towards their work and in extreme examples, even sabotage. All of these are costs to the organization, but are usually ignored as it is difficult to quantify. Another problem with motivation by fear is that the working environment becomes tense and stressful, clearly unsuitable conditions for good quality and quantity of work. Staff in a sense, become 'robots' who are happy to do the bare minimal at the workplace.

On the other hand, motivating people with strong leadership skills, will bring out the best in them. Recognize, reward, encourage and appreciate them and this will increase worker output to a substantial extent. Employees thrive on recognition and appreciation and want to be treated fairly. This is something that seems to be lacking in many Malaysian organizations.

Failure to act against non-performers

Although they like motivating by fear, ironically many Malaysian managers are not ruthless enough when dealing with non-performers. When it comes to the crunch, we prefer to 'tolerate' rather than terminate. And it is this 'kind face of management' that gets abused again and again by a minority of employees. If asked, I am sure most of us can name at least five people in our organizations who do not contribute; in other words, are liabilities to the organization. And yet we are perplexed when management takes no decisive action against these people. Why is this so? Why do organizations pay good salaries and yet do not demand good services in return. Again, I attribute this to our culture where we prefer to be nice rather than nasty. This is well and good, but I believe that at the right times, managers must learn to be ruthless. Otherwise the organization will lose out as it takes only one of these types of employees to have a negative and demoralizing effect on the rest.

Focusing on the Ends and not the Means

Many a time, managers are only focused on the ends and not the means. They tend to 'manage quantitatively'. Management is only geared towards achieving certain numbers and nothing else. When this happens, these managers become blinded by these numbers. My contention is that these numbers are only a by-product; taking actions to change the numbers without managing what generates the numbers will serve to have long time damaging consequences on an organization's effectiveness.

There are even some Malaysian organizations which hire CEO's on a one or two year contract basis, who are then informed that the renewal of the contract is dependant on their performance: in short, profits. Hence, these CEO's tend to focus on short term targets and importantly play the numbers game. These are usually achieved at the long term detriment of the company concerned. In his book, 'Good to Great', Michael Collins states that the companies which are great never became successful overnight. It was as a result of prolonged stewardship of the company of an individual who displayed very good leadership skills and importantly, focused on long term goals.

Ironically, when I train managers, I find that most of them are aware of the above and yet when asked 'Why don't you try to reduce these negative behaviors', the answers vary from 'Its too difficult' to 'I don't even have time for my work, so how do you expect me to concentrate on these other factors'. My answer has always been that 'being a good manager is never easy'. Those who are able to reduce some of the above behaviors will surely reap the rewards in the long term, in terms of managerial excellence. And with that will come more satisfaction, motivation and fulfillment in a managerial career.