
WHAT'S IMPORTANT | Volume VI, Issue 1 | Jan. 27, 2010

"What's Important" is a universal concern. The phrase resonates with an infinite number of meanings. What's important is both a question and an answer, depending on the situation.

Barbara worked in her share of toxic corporate atmospheres. When hired as COO of a major player in the health care arena, her personal mission was to help foster a positive, healthy working environment.

She collaborated with the HR Vice President to create and maintain employee morale programs, survey staff attitudes and implement employee incentive and appreciation efforts. While these programs netted a temporary morale bump for individuals, the overall office environment did not appear to improve proportionately with the effort invested.

Barbara was stumped. She decided to investigate the difference between employees who seemed genuinely happy in their jobs and those who grumbled most. In doing so, Barbara learned two important lessons:

1. The happy employees expressed gratitude for the people, opportunities and experiences in their lives. This was true on the job, but also in their families, communities and broader social circles. Even in the face of hardships or difficulties, they sought out the silver lining. Their inner sense of happiness was the lens through which they viewed their outer world.
2. The unhappy employees expressed feeling embattled, both on the job and in life. They saw challenges, obstacles and antagonistic authority everywhere they looked. Even if they had earned employee recognition awards or pay increases, they managed to create a "gotcha" associated with them. For this group, there was no silver lining for which they could not find a cloud.

Barbara realized that how an employee viewed work was an extension of how he or she viewed life. Even the best workplace morale program can't "make" an employee happy; that job is solely and exclusively up to each individual.

She also learned that the unhappy employees were so busy looking outside themselves to explain the way they felt that they gave up authority over their own attitudes. No wonder they felt disempowered.

Barbara and the HR team brainstormed ways to remind employees that their attitude is their choice, and to encourage executive leaders to set a strong example. They hired a leadership coach to work individually with execs and with teams to create an environment that empowered employees to reclaim ownership of their attitudes.

Six months later, the particularly skeptical CFO expressed a change of opinion.

"When you came up with this plan, I thought it was a colossal waste of resources. Now, I see that the staff is happier and more productive, and that's great. But, I'm getting worried. Both my assistant and my wife have informed me that I'm more pleasant to be around since this plan of yours got started. If we're not careful, this happy stuff might cause me to lose my hard-nosed reputation."

He shook her hand and offered a sincere "thank you" before charging to his next meeting.

What's Important is that happy is a choice, an inside job, that is solely ours to make.

Email me at chuck@durakis.com to share your thoughts.

Thanks,

Chuck