DEVELOPING A HIGH-PERFORMING WORKFORCE

THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUIPPING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS WITH INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

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Imagine if your engineers can't collaborate or network with each other to share information . . .

. . . if your sales force resists embracing change that's essential to the success of your organization . . .

. . . or if your project managers fail to build loyalty among your customers, even driving them away because they don't act on customer feedback?

According to our research and experience, these scenarios are not imaginary. Across all industries, non-management professionals are skilled technically but come up short interpersonally. Technical skills are immensely important at this level, but without the ability to influence and partner, an individual team member cannot be effective. A deficiency in interpersonal skills impacts an organization's ability to do everything from producing products and negotiating with suppliers, to managing relationships within teams, or with key customers.

Exacerbating this problem are the demands of today's workplace. Staff reductions result in heavier workloads for those still on the payrolls. There is intense pressure to work harder and faster, and thus work smarter. In this paper, we'll make the case for focused interpersonal skills development for individual contributors. We'll also offer some solutions that have worked for organizations across the world to address these issues.

MAKING THE CASE FOR FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT

Who are these "individual contributors" we speak of? They are the majority of every organization's workforce. They're engineers. Nurses and therapists. Accountants, specialists, and project managers. They may manage projects instead of people. And many hold very senior positions while eschewing formal leadership roles.

They don't lead others, and according to the research, 62 percent don't want to. They're happy contributing their well-honed and valuable technical skills. They are passionate about the work they do, and leading others would present an unwelcome distraction.

And they're not very happy. Recent DDI research uncovered some unsettling attitudes about this amongst non-leadership staff. Consider the following:

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> Fifty-one percent of the U.S. workforce reports feeling that their careers are stagnant, according to DDI's report *"Pulse of the Workforce: 2009 Survey of Individual Contributors."*

> Of those stagnant workers, 44 percent plan to look for a new job as soon as the economy improves.

> When looking at organizations where DDI has surveyed and found low engagement, less than 7 in 10 professional individual contributors feel that there is positive cooperation in their work group to get the job done.

These negative feelings appear to be festering below the surface—out of sight for leadership, but on the minds of individual contributors. Looking at the big picture painted by this research, we see that a high percentage of the workforce is disgruntled and disengaged. They don't feel their work is challenging or that their organizations care about their careers. They lack opportunity to grow. Training resources are often invested in their leaders, and leave this population hungry for development and resentful when it's not delivered.

They're motivated to find better opportunities elsewhere. As organizations look forward to the end of the global recession and getting past the problems it presents, they're facing a new set of problems. When hiring picks up again, companies will need to fight as hard to keep the employees they have as for those they want to hire.

SOLVING THE INDIVIDUAL PERFORMER PUZZLE

Clearly, organizations need strategies for these valuable contributors, some of whom will ascend to very senior positions managing projects and innovation rather than people. Organizations need to tap into the discretionary effort and creativity of their individual contributors and for them to be as productive as possible. And they need to demonstrate a commitment to these workers that inspires them to be engaged and to stay for the long term.

What's more, to be relevant and financially defensible in these times, strategies need to have a clear payoff for both the individual contributors and the organization. These people enable the business to meet its goals. And they give staffs the skills needed to execute on those goals. Technical skills are, of course, critically important, but our research shows that this audience needs to be just as adept in what we call the "individual contributor imperatives." Individual contributors agree—technical skills and interpersonal skills are equally important for success.

The individual contributor imperatives focus on interpersonal skills that endure for a career, serving the most effective associates in all endeavors. That is, to be effective in their jobs and in how they contribute to organizational success, they must influence through personal effectiveness, partner with others, and build customer loyalty. We'll explore each imperative in depth here.

Imperative 1:
Influence Through Personal Effectiveness

What happens when an individual contributor interacts with a colleague? Or a key supplier? Or a customer? Can that person meet his (or her) own needs during that interaction? Is he cognizant of what his partner needs as well? When working with others, can he take feedback, react well to change, and prevent (or at least, successfully manage) conflict? Does he inspire feelings of trust?

An associate with the most advanced technical skills is destined to fail if he does not have the skills to be effective in interactions with others. These skills are important for leaders, but perhaps even more important for individual contributors who lack "position power." These associates need other ways to elicit the support and commitment of their coworkers, and even leaders in some cases.

Here are some of the most important ways individual contributors will use personal effectiveness skills:

> **Personal and Practical Needs.**
  Whether dealing with internal partners or external clients, basic interpersonal skills encourage an individual to formulate a win/win approach. That is, in the process of meeting one's own needs, those with solid personal effectiveness skills think about not only what their internal and external customers need to get out of an interaction from a practical standpoint, but what one needs to do to meet their emotional/personal needs as well.

> **Listen to Learn.** Just listening to someone else isn't enough, associates need to understand what they're listening for, and how to act on what they hear. For example, can someone link the non-verbal cues they observe with the conversation they're having? When a colleague or customer provides feedback, does that individual recognize and act on it? Or do they only "listen to refute?" When an individual can demonstrate that they are open to others' messages and know what to do with the information, interactions with colleagues are vastly improved.

> **Be an Agent of Change.** Organizations are constantly evolving, and perhaps no harm is done if an associate passively accepts change. However, no good is done either. Your most valuable individual contributors are the ones who will embrace and initiate change. They are the ones who can drive the improvement and innovation that an organization so desperately needs to outperform the competition.

> **Prevent, Don't Resolve.** If there's personal conflict in a workplace, the situation has gone too far. The drama associated with conflict is fodder for countless sitcoms and movies, but in the real world it only leads to unproductive discord and dispute. Skilled associates know how to recognize the signs of conflict and de-escalate a situation before it boils over. They know how to "work it out." If individual differences are acknowledged and leveraged they can be a source of positive energy for an organization.

> **Bottom line: Trust.** Some people offer trust willingly, with others it must be earned first. With either approach, a lack of the interpersonal skills we've just outlined here will damage trust—often irrevocably. We'll discuss trust further under the next imperative.

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In our consultation with clients, we've seen firsthand how beneficial interpersonal skills that transform one-on-one interactions can be. One example that comes to mind is a global energy and fuel provider. This organization wanted to improve basic interaction skills, so they created a curriculum that addressed communication, handling conflict, and managing change. It's now provided to all new employees around the world as part of the organization's new hire orientation. People learn early that strong interpersonal skills are important to the organization and how to work better together in order to improve quality and productivity and meet organizational goals. For another organization, an automotive manufacturer, rapid expansion of plants drove the need to balance technical expertise with interpersonal skills. A curriculum including communication, feedback, managing change, and resolving conflict helped the organization increase their global market share in this highly competitive market.

IMPERATIVE 2: PARTNER WITH OTHERS

As part of recent research we asked a sample of individual contributors to define their level in the company, and the most popular answer by far was "team member." Every associate has an immediate work group, typically comprised of a leader, colleagues who also report to that person, and key members of other teams who help get work done. But beyond an immediate team, many also serve on a number of other ad hoc teams. Examples include project teams, quality teams, task forces, committees, and guilds. Team members have responsibilities to meet team needs. And to carry out responsibilities to teams, individual contributors need solid partnership skills.

What makes team interactions different from one-on-one interactions? Several things. For one, teams move through stages of development, starting as a mere gathering of individuals, then moving through a process developing norms and likely even managing conflict. Effective teams will sort out their differences in order to be functional. Ineffective teams (populated by individuals lacking team effectiveness skills) will get stuck along the way, becoming mired in conflict or differences that will stand in the way of the group's goals.

So what makes teams successful? We've identified five factors, and they're all centered around interpersonal skills:

> **Results.** Team members have a clear focus on results when they understand the team's purpose; they can explain their team's long and short-term goals, as well as detail how they support the larger organizational goals. Setting and reaching team goals requires collaboration and influence, the ability to reach agreement, review progress, and sometimes manage conflict.

> **Process.** To get things done, teams must have processes to complete tasks, identify problems, and reach agreement. Skills such as checking for understanding, organizing meetings by making agendas and tracking agreement, and conducting regular reviews of how work is accomplished are important to develop team processes.

> **Communication.** Respect is at the core of any successful team. And respect is earned when team members exhibit good listening skills, resolve conflict, effectively share information, and are open to new ideas... even those judged to be too "wild and crazy" at first examination.

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> **Commitment.** Team members show their full commitment by being willing to take risks and make the difficult decisions necessary to achieve high levels of performance. Doing this well requires the desire to be involved, the willingness to accept accountability, and the skills to make decisions and take action.

> **And That Bottom Line: Trust.** To inspire trust and be able to trust others, team members must be able to admit mistakes, ask for help, share openly, and live up to their agreements. They should also value differences of style and opinion, rather than dismissing anything different without further investigation.

One additional group-based skill to bear in mind for individual contributors is **networking**. Business networking is different than social networking, in that it's purposeful. In addition to collecting contacts who may be useful down the road, business networking pinpoints network contacts who can contribute their information and expertise to help an individual reach his or her goals . . . now. Additionally, individuals need to know how to reciprocate, helping others when the time comes. Finally, business networking requires courage. For many it can be scary to reach out and ask for help, and organizations need to foster skills that enable courageous networking.

Our clients provide compelling anecdotes as to why team skills are so important. In fact, numerous clients have approached us with the need to improve their teams' performance by focusing in key interpersonal (rather than technical) skills. An example: a business services company was moving to a shared services model.

Their staff needed better skills to improve processes and work together better as a team. Training their associates in process improvement, decision making, and quality orientation helped drive continuous improvement and develop group effectiveness skills.

BUILD CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Customer retention is a key organizational priority. The word "customer" appears in almost all organizational mission/vision statements, and most organizations have strategic priorities that focus on customer satisfaction and loyalty. A small increase in customer retention can result in major gains in profitability. This fact is well known in the executive suite. Regardless of the economy or other forces, building customer loyalty has been and always will be essential.

And largely, the day-to-day management of customers falls to an organization's individual contributors, who serve as the face of their company. They're answering the phones, selling and marketing the products, delivering the goods, and most importantly, handling the relationship between the organization and the customer. With key accounts, the dollar value of these relationships can be seven figures. One can argue that the quality of that relationship is only as good as the quality of the interpersonal skills of the person managing it.

Direct contact with an external customer isn't the only way customer service skills have impact. Individual contributors are in the best position to work with their internal partners to improve an organization's service experience. They need the drive and the skills to work in the customer's favor as part of the chain of service.

Many of the basic interpersonal skills, such as listening, communicating, and building trust, are essential for interactions with customers. Some additional interaction skills include: Making the customer feel important, understood, and involved; managing the customer interaction; and knowing what to do when confronted with a dissatisfied customer (internal or external).

So what interaction skills are important for driving customer loyalty? We'd generalize them this way:

> **Seek understanding.** Those who handle customers well will always be asking, "what does my client want, and how can I exceed that expectation?" They'll actively involve the customer and seek clues to his or her personal and practical needs. These individuals are also skilled in confirming satisfaction at the end of an interaction to ensure all needs are met.

> **Client-centric communication.** Those facing customers not only need to understand their clientele's needs, but communicate to meet those needs. This means acknowledging needs, so customers understand that the organization's representative is truly listening. It also entails clarifying needs to avoid assumptions and ensure that the right need is being met. Other skills include the ability to appropriately share rationale around why something is done a certain way, and to communicate positively in a way that makes the customer feel valued.

> **Take the heat.** It's a fact, customers will be disappointed if their personal and/or practical needs are not being met. How an individual handles that dissatisfaction will make or break the relationship. It's an advanced skill . . . being able to turn around a bad experience and retain a customer. But it's a skill that is absolutely pivotal nonetheless.

Not surprisingly, we have a plethora of examples from our own customers of how customer loyalty is important. A security company needed to improve skills among its customer service representatives . . . a health care organization needed all associates to improve skills in order to drive patient satisfaction (a key industry metric) . . . a furniture retailer distinguishes itself in the marketplace because of the exemplary service its associates provide, and the company continually develops customer-focused interaction skills. In all of these cases, improving customer service skills improves the company's bottom line.

CONCLUSIONS

Technical skills are the price of entry. To use a sporting analogy, they'll gain someone access to the game, but to get on the field and be a star player that individual needs interpersonal abilities. Merely understanding the game is not enough.

Think of today's top athletes. The vast majority are part of teams. They need to know how to pass a ball to a teammate,

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or signal that they're open, or run with it when the game changes. A rogue loner on the field will not only cause the team to fail to achieve its goals, but may actually keep him from meeting his own goals, particularly when those goals include advancing his career in his chosen field. And even those who compete individually need to rely on a team of trainers and coaches to achieve their goals.

Individual contributors who comprise today's workforce are no different. They can be merely players, or with the right skills, they can be truly exceptional performers.

LOOKING FOR MORE?

Delve into our study, "Pulse of the Workforce" for more insights about this key segment within your organization. To get your copy of this study, and to read more about how DDI can help your individual contributors become exceptional performers, visit us at ddiworld.com.

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