



Short Staff

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

A student in one of my MBA classes made a remarkable statement the other day. She wrote, "Short staff think only inside the box." The unusual wording made an impact, and I decided to write on the concept.

Of course, she was not referring to people of lesser stature. She was commenting on the habitual practice of numerous organizations to run so thin on staffing that they compromise the viability of the business.

Knowing the "correct" level of staff is a tricky business for sure. I have done consulting for organizations where the employees are screaming that they are totally overloaded. Later on, working with these same groups, people would grumble about how most people are not pulling their fair share of the load. In truth, most organizations get only a small fraction of the discretionary effort inherent in the workforce. My own unscientific estimate is that a typical organization these days manages to extract only about 30% of the capability of their workforce.

Some leaders use the amount of screaming for more resources as a guide to hiring. If the whining is not there, they figure the organization is running too fat. If people are complaining but toughing it out, they conclude things are about right. If people are becoming ill and if turnover is sky high, they grudgingly agree to put on a couple more people.

Gauging the level of staff based on the complaint level is dangerous on both extremes. If things get so thin for an extended period, the best people will just leave. If you wait until people whine to hire anyone, then you are probably running a Country Club.

Back to my student's comment on the impact that running thin has on creativity. I thought her observation was spot on. You can observe overworked people in numerous venues. According to many students, one typical place to see the stress is in nursing. According to the Gallup Organization, the nursing occupation is the highest trusted occupation category of all every year since they have been measuring trust in

organizations. Yet, nurses are normally so stacked up with critical tasks that they don't find time to eat let alone try to figure out creative solutions to problems. I am only singling out nurses because it is easy to observe this situation, in reality the problem occurs in numerous types of jobs.

In an effort to improve productivity leaders stretch their resources like a rubber band. The problem is that if you do that, eventually you will exceed the elastic limit of the rubber, and it will permanently deform or just snap. In those conditions, people are going to do the requirements as best they can and not be very engaged in improving the conditions. They become case hardened and bitter. When people feel abused, they go into a survival mode, which severely limits productivity, so the managers get exactly what they deserve. It becomes a vicious circle.

The antidote is to work on changing the culture so that the current workforce is producing at a multiple of their prior productivity instead of just a tiny percentage higher than the prior year. That means working on trust rather than forcing existing people to work in a constant state of overload. It means investing in the resources you have, and maybe even adding some, rather than continually cutting back in an effort to survive. You may survive in the short term, but your long term prognosis is terminal.

When I suggest to leaders that they need to invest in their culture, I often get an incredulous or outraged look in return. "How can we possibly afford to work on our culture when everybody is already at the limit of their capability?" Well, you cannot unless you change your attitude about how people work. If you would try the alternate path, it would quickly become apparent that the road to long term health and even survival is to have the right level of resources so that you can invest in the culture.

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