



Tired of Poor Results? Try Less Control

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The advice in the title sounds backward, doesn't it? The typical knee-jerk reaction when things are not going according to desires at work is for managers to add more controls. This is an effort to get more people to do what they are supposed to do, so performance will improve. Only one problem: most of the time greater control translates into *lower* performance.

The reason why more control is usually the worst course of action has to do with motivation. In most organizations, there is already too much control over what people do. Policy manuals and specific rules for how we do things are installed for a reason, and woe be to anybody who breaks the rules.

The signal being sent by management is that they do not trust people to do the right thing. When managers heap more rules onto the already steaming pile of procedures, people become more disillusioned, and motivation takes a hit. Result: people comply begrudgingly, but will not go beyond simple compliance. The organization suffers as workers leave most of their discretionary effort on the front steps.

Great managers realize that by reducing the control, performance often increases and does so in dramatic ways. In *Smart Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey and Greg Link give ample evidence that when employees are trusted to do what is right, they normally rise to the occasion, and remarkable things start to happen. The book has literally hundreds of data points to show there is a definite trend here, but one example, in particular, caught my eye.

I like the story of Gordon Bethune, who took over the helm at Continental Airlines in 1994. At that time, Continental was approaching its third bankruptcy, and performance measures in all areas were the worst in the industry. The workers had been so abused by managers applying onerous rules and regulations that they were just going through the motions, and Gordon did not blame them. He was smart enough to recognize he would need to repair their spirits before he could get them to perform. He likened the

daunting task of turning around their enthusiasm to being the adopted parents of severely abused children. He would have to earn their trust before he could begin to restore their enthusiasm for the work. But how could he do that?

In a number of steps, he started to show employees that he had more faith in them than in the rule books. In fact, at one point, he had company policy manuals taken out to the parking lot where he had them burned publicly. Rather than rely on controlling rules, he let the people know the objectives and broad operating methods, but let the employees use their own judgment in making the decisions on day-to-day activities.

Over the next decade, Continental Airlines, with this new philosophy of fewer rules and higher trust, began to win customer service awards. Their stock price went from \$2 to over \$50, and in Bethune's final year, *Fortune* ranked Continental the Most Admired Global Airline. Let's sum it up. Fewer rules and higher trust allowed a nearly dead airline to rise to a predominant position. Why? Because the power of the people is what you need to run any successful organization.

Covey and Link give a five part formula in the book that creates a pathway toward an enduring trust that is neither blind or naive. It is what they call Smart Trust. I recommend the book for any manager who is struggling with poor performance and a situation of over control.

It is important not to just throw away all procedures, because some of them are needed for legal purposes or to ensure standard practices in complex and critical situations. Managers should stop trying to account for every situation that might go wrong. They should stop trying to direct people how to react to every single scenario, because it chokes out the creativity and enthusiasm of the workforce.

The secret is to have specific processes only where they are needed, and allow people to use their brains when an off-standard condition requires quick thinking. For example, there may be a set procedure for investigating the situation before granting a customer refund, but there will be times when it is wiser to ignore the rule and immediately accept the customer's word.

When managers allow people to use their God-given intelligence, they nearly always do the right thing, and if they make a mistake it is usually a small one. If the rulebook is so heavy that it takes hours to find out the proper way to react to a given situation, what you will get is simple compliance most of the time, but you will miss the opportunity to have a fully engaged workforce.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-*

Body Language: Building Trust Online, and Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com **or** 585.392.7763

