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Flex for Success

[By Ted Sottong]

I once told my boss that I wanted his job. I don't work there anymore. To my bewilderment, the comment did not make him my mentor, but instead, it moved us further from each other. I wasn't fired for that comment; I ended up leaving on my own.

Why would I have said such a thing? Because it was true. He was a good man to emulate. He was an excellent architect, was a good person, and had seemingly boundless energy. I learned a great deal from him. What he was doing with his career was the same thing I wanted to do with mine. I thought I had offered him a compliment—a request for mentorship. As the owner of the company, he certainly had nothing to fear from a young upstart such as myself. But I look back on that single statement and its result as probably the most definitive moment of my relationship with him.

Whose Career is This, Anyway?

When you own a company, it's an integral part of your life. It could be said that it is your life. Your career and your job coincide exactly. Your decision-making process starts with "What's best for the company?" not "What's best for my career?"

Now, take an employee with a career ambition. Many managers would expect that employee to think of his job as his career. But the reality is unless he is an owner in the business, it is a job.

Of course, no matter who you are, decisions within the job must always be made in the best interest of the company. Life decisions, when made by an employee, will be made in the best interest of his own career, not the company. As the employee becomes more willing to sacrifice his career to the company, advancement will occur until the employee's career becomes subservient to the company. At that point, some level of ownership is appropriate.

In the pursuit of a career, then, your company is a stepping stone, a means (job) to an end (career) but not the end itself. Yep, you're using each other. But you're each being used in the best possible way.

This is not only the way it is but the way it should be. It is not derogatory to think of your employees in these terms. They are individuals with ambitions of their own. It would be derogatory to assume that they want to dedicate their lives to pursuing your goals. Instead, understanding your employees' goals, ambitions, and hopes for their own careers is nothing more than giving them the respect they deserve.

So how do we manage people who hold the company as no more than a second priority-

sometimes quite a bit lower? How do we motivate them? How do we hold onto them? This is a challenge that, if handled well, can make your company stronger.

Your company is structured to accomplish certain goals—goals that were probably established from the time your business started. Every time a person is hired, that person comes to the company with her own goals, her own ambitions, and her own expectations for her life. If she cannot pursue those interests within the structure of your company, then one of two things will occur. She will be unhappy and stay, or she will leave. If you want her to stay and be happy, the company must be flexible enough to accommodate those interests.

The flexibility required in the structure of your organization can take many forms. Corporate flexibility lets your employees know that their careers are respected and that they won't need to leave to pursue their own careers. They can do it right there working for you.

Once this philosophical leap is made, your company will open up to more possibilities. Those who are pursuing their careers within



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your company will potentially take you in new directions you may not have previously considered. They will invent new ways of doing things and bring dimension, energy, and commitment to the company themselves. They will be motivated because they will be pursuing their own careers, not yours.

And if an employee tells you that he wants to do your job, you have succeeded. That employee has recognized that there is the flexibility in the organization to rise to that level and that his career is now coinciding more closely with the job he is performing. He has become the ultimate employee, and you have made it possible.

Creative Space

As I am an architect, creativity is crucial to my business. It is easy for me to see the value in trying to find ways to keep people creative. It may be harder to understand how creativity fits into some other professions—until, that is, you understand your employee's need to pursue her own career.

Developing goals is a creative act. Imagining your career is a creative act. Understanding that all people want to define their own lives is understanding them as creative individuals. Providing for more creative space in the workplace is one effective way to change mindsets and empower employees to think about their work and their lives in a different way.

I have talked to many young people who are in the process of deciding on a career path. "I can't imagine spending my life sitting behind a desk," many have told me. I remember having the same aversion to the prospect of a "desk job" at that age.

They have defined their careers in terms of their work environments, and in many cases, these decisions have a significant impact on the careers they pursue. One's understanding of the work environment is a crucial piece of the equation in the creation of a career. It seems logical, then, that changing the work environment will allow for the reconsideration of a career.

Think about your job. Does it require a desk? Computers and other technologies may allow desks to be done away with completely. You may not be ready to embrace telecommuting, but perhaps making your office feel more like home would give some of your employees what they are looking for. Consider the advantages of a flexible work environment in terms of its potential to improve communication, increase productivity, and reflect the values of your company as a flexible organization that trusts and empowers its employees.

Flexible Hours

Much has been said about the incoming generation and their desire for more flexible work hours as well as other benefits that make many of today's managers, myself included, bristle. After all, we are not here to cater to their needs; we're here to get work done. Right?

Well, while I am still not ready to make a PlayStation part of the work environment, there may be some benefits of flexible work schedules. Most companies have set working hours for a reason. It is important to understand those reasons and then look for ways to introduce some flexibility into the schedule that does not run counter to those reasons. It is still reasonable to expect a 40-

hour week, but maybe not all of those hours need to be between 9:00 and 5:00. Increasing the hours per day Monday through Thursday and then offering time off on Fridays is becoming a more common practice, and it allows employees a little more personal time during working hours one day a week to run errands when other businesses are open.

Understanding family situations is also important. Single-parent families especially are challenged when the needs of the children coincide with working hours. Having flexibility in schedules makes things easier for them without other employees feeling like those with children are getting special treatment.

A Culture of Change

How often do things change at your workplace? If every day is like the last, you run the risk of putting your employees firmly in a rut. The messages sent by a stagnant workplace can be easily translated by the employee into a stagnant career. A culture of change will encourage employees to present their ideas and think of their careers as dynamic.

One dramatic candidate for change is the individual's workspace. In many (with some thought, most) environments, it is possible to move people on a regular basis. Whether the frequency is weekly, daily, or even yearly, it will decrease the sense of ownership of a particular space and increase the sense of ownership of the company space. The objective is not to rob people of their claims on personal space but simply to redefine them.

Now, some creative thought needs to be expended to make this work. For example,



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maybe instead of tacking pictures of children to the wall of the cubicle, each employee receives a tack board that can be easily moved from space to space. Better yet, why not provide a central location for pictures of children so that they can show them off? Moving workspaces with some frequency has the added benefit of requiring a cleanup of workspaces to be performed at the same frequency.

Small things can be changed, too. Is the company picnic held in the same place every year? Are there some people who would redecorate the break room if you let them? What predictable routines can be changed?

If the same principles are utilized to assign tasks all the time, maybe those principles can be changed. People could be challenged to use different skills. While there may be some short-term loss of productivity, having more than one employee skilled at a particular task is advantageous in the event that your regular goes out sick for an extended period of time. Also, you may find that some people have skills they weren't even utilizing!

Whether it's the physical environment where the work gets done or the way work gets done, change and flexibility will keep minds creative and possibly uncover hidden talents. Your employees themselves may have great ideas about things to change and how to change them. Not only will the changes be more relevant, but the employees will also gain more actual control over their own environments.

The Ultimate Flexibility

A good manager does not need to protect his job. He should feel free to introduce enough flexibility to make the pursuit of his job by others a possibility. While this may seem like managerial suicide, it is actually a key to success.

The best leaders surround themselves with the smartest people they can find. Those people will make you, as a leader, look great. To find and hire those people and then put limits on their growth isn't suicide; its murder/suicide. You kill their spirit, and then you lose the people who helped make you successful.

The key is to not only use these people to make you look better but also to help you be better. Let them challenge you. Let them bring ideas to improve the company, and be sure they receive recognition for them. Make them part of your team. If it looks like one of them is in danger of taking your job, then you've gotten lazy, and you need to improve yourself. As a manager, you have not arrived. You can get better, too. If you are a manager, that's good for your career. And if you're a partner, it's good for your company.

Put your job up for grabs, and then enter yourself in the competition. If you build the right team, allow them flexibility, empower them to create their own careers, and keep ideas and people out of the box, you should emerge victorious.

Flexibility in the workplace sends the message that you understand that your employees are responsible and smart enough to control their own destinies. Allow people to shape their own physical environment, and empower them to control their own careers. It's a good business move, and it's the right thing to do.

About the Author:

Ted Sottong graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1991 with a Master of Architecture and has been practicing architecture for the past 16 years. Currently, he is a partner and vice president at Architecture, Inc., where he runs the Florida office. Ted is an LEED Accredited Professional and licensed to practice architecture in Florida, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. He has worked extensively in the housing markets, completing award-winning projects for both senior and student housing.

Prior to running the Florida office, Ted held various management positions at prior firms, including CAD manager, project manager, project architect, and director of production.

Ted has developed an innovative work environment designed to foster teamwork and creativity. He believes that empowering employees is both productive and rewarding. His office grew from one employee to 16 in about three years.

Ted is active in Rotary and the local AIA chapter and serves on the Executive Board of the Boy Scouts.

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