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Helping you align your people with your vision



It's Personal and Business:

Five Smart Strategies for Better Results

By Libby Wagner, Founder of Professional Leadership Results

I have another confession to make. I have quite an assortment of what some might call “chick flicks.” I’m not embarrassed about this because the way I see it, I don’t read romance novels with busty women on the covers and I only like chick flicks with good dialogue and smart actors. I can’t seem to help it—I don’t care that the plot line is often predictable, there will always be some sort of absurd challenge, but in the end, it works out.

One of my favorites is *You’ve Got Mail* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan. He’s a millionaire chain bookstore owner and she’s an independent book seller. They have an Internet romance and hate each other in person. It has a happy ending, of course, with “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” running in the closing credits. One of my favorite lines in the film happens when they are finally deciding, in person, that they will be friends. He asks her if she can forgive him for putting her out of business by telling her, “it’s not *personal*, it’s *business*,” and she tells him how much she hates that saying because “no matter what it is, it should start out with being personal.” What’s the matter with being personal?

I was so happy, recently, to find Ronna Lichtenberg’s book *It’s not Business, It’s Personal* quoted in an online interview. I was unhappy; however, to request it at my local bookstore to find it was sadly, out of print, even though it was published in 2001! Yet, the shelves were

stocked with plenty of books on business, finance, selling, marketing, and leadership, ad infinitum. To be fair, I like some of those other books, but this was the one I wanted. The one I told my friend Tamara I probably shouldn’t read because it would only make me more self-righteous about the *people thing*.

Once, I found myself in an uncomfortable position with a former colleague who had been on an interview panel for a position for which I was applying. I was trying to get some feedback from her. “Your leadership style is about people,” she said, “You develop relationships with them and then they follow you.” I was waiting for the punch line. “And? So?” I queried. “It’s supposed to be about the work,” she emphasized. I was dumbstruck. My response to her—“If it’s not about the people first, then the work just isn’t that important!”—hung there in the air. I left that job in less than two months.

I’m trying very hard to understand organizations’ discomfort with the people thing. Sure, people are messy, chaotic, unpredictable, funny, extreme, intense . . . the list goes on. What strikes me as odd and oddly dysfunctional is the either/or dichotomy I run up against in organizations over and over. It’s as if we want to reclaim the business model of the Industrial Era—the one that revolutionized manufacturing—that we’re all supposed to perform the same tasks in the same way, day after day, as if we are working on an assembly line. Even that isn’t an accurate picture of modern production and manufacturing. Why isn’t work about the people and the work itself? Why do we persist in thinking the people thing doesn’t matter, is secondary to the work itself? It isn’t. Systems theory, Quantum physics, common sense . . . these all support the notion

that we are not fragmented beings, we are interconnected. We don't need a self-help guru to tell us that our personal lives should be balanced without some inkling that our work lives should be balanced, too.

In the Great Places to Work® Trust Index®, employees respond to “57 statements that cover credibility, respect, fairness, pride, and camaraderie”. These elements are about principles, values and relationships. Trust is the foundation of any strong relationship, no matter the context. Patrick Lencioni, in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, begins with the foundation of trust in rebuilding a team that's broken. The Twelve Questions developed by the Gallup Organization are designed to measure the strength of a workplace and primarily center on clarity of expectations, regular feedback, relationships, and people being able to work in their areas of strength. There are plenty of articles and books piling up on my bedside table to support this integration of the work thing with the people thing, so why do we still resist it?

I think it's about fear. Fear that our great plans for work productivity and performance will get all messed up with the messy people. Someone's mother will die. Someone else will get divorced. Our team leader will get breast cancer. Our IT guys don't get along and now we can't get our software loaded. Everyone's scared of the HR director. All of these people issues are about being human and imperfect. Smart leaders not only make room for the people thing, they embrace it, cultivate it, grow it.

They engage it and use it to make their organizations stronger, more productive, and more successful. And they care about whether or not the *people thing* is working because, in the end, if it doesn't, the goals of the organization won't be working either because *they are supposed to do the work!* (I'm resisting writing 'duh!?' —well, I guess I did it anyway.)

How can you impact the human element of human performance?

Here are five smart strategies for improved results:

1. Clear the swamp. Find out what's going on that gets in the way of people doing their best work. What are the obstacles to high levels of productivity, trust and morale?

2. Create opportunities for building trust. If you're not the person to plan the event, activity, project or contest, find someone who is. Assign work to teams, encourage team building and collaboration. Take time to find out about your coworkers as people by offering opportunities to get to know one another. Opportunities for team building are not just about touchy-feely exercises—meaningful work and opportunities for growth within your organization help to build the essential value of trust.

3. Help people learn to confront effectively. Issues around poor performance or disruptive behaviors have a huge impact on people. Most will tell you they'll do anything to avoid conflict or their past attempts at confrontation have been unsuccessful. The cost of not dealing with these issues is too high for an organization to ignore.

4. Facilitate Problem Solving. Effective problem solving often takes time, but if you are willing to get at the real issues by listening, asking good questions, and encouraging the move out of victim-mode into a place of action, this will increase productivity and impact morale, too.

5. Recognize, or else. One size does *not* fit all for recognition of good work and praise, so take time to find out how people like to be recognized—gesture of thanks and faith, increased responsibility, compensation, etc. Most importantly, you can impact performance by offering *specific* praise and recognition so that people will know what they did well and that they can do it again!

Let's make a commitment to change our either/or paradigm about the workplace. It's not personal or business, it's personal and business. *The people thing* is essential to the work! ❖

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