

Chapter 2

The Executive Thumbprint*It all starts at the top*

Leaders imprint their organizations with values, beliefs and operational philosophies. A brief conversation with the person (or people) at the top will tell you much about how people at all levels of the organization are expected to think and feel. So, then, here's Basic #1:

Basic 1: *The person at the top of the organization sets the tone for the way in which the entire organization functions.*

Whether for good or for ill, top management marks the organization with a thumbprint that affects all levels. Even individuals who join the workforce with divergent opinions soon feel the pressures to adapt to the chief executive's perspective.

Those who do are promoted. Those who do not, are left to stagnate with no advancement potential. It goes to the

very core of the operational methods and attitudes that support any organization.

When the philosophy from above is one of openness, employees feel a sense of community and importance. If, however, top management is closed and clandestine in its dealings, employees adopt similar patterns of intrigue and game-playing.

While some chief executives revel in the ability to form the organization in their own images, others are oblivious to the behind-the-scenes power that they have. Either they have been in their positions so long that they take these dynamics for granted, or they do not understand that "do as I say, not as I do" has never worked as a management method because employees invariably in subtle ways "do as you do."

It is a continual frustration to me to deal with chief executives who want something done, but who don't want to get involved in doing it. The most critical example of this is the formulation and implementation of an organization's mission and vision. Many organizations have missions and visions, but only a fraction of them truly live them. This is discussed in a later chapter.

Commitments to current management theory often seem like frozen custard stands advertising “the flavor of the day.” Who can ever forget TQM, or quality circles, or MBO? In their days, they were held up as solutions to everything that ails an organization.

Many executives embrace the latest buzzwords because they want their organizations to be viewed as on the cutting edge of management philosophy. Today, with the Internet and global networks, information moves quickly and tenaciously.

The marketplace knows who really believes what they say and who are merely mouthing the words.

Often, top management decides to "buy" the latest trend. “Experts” are retained to come in, work with staff, and to leave only when an organization has the external trappings of the new belief system.

The executives' total involvement in the process is periodic updates or 15-minute briefings of how things are shaping up. They are then irritated that, when the experts leave, nothing has changed. Their bottom lines have not improved and their people have returned to old patterns.

Yet, they still speak the language of the new millennium because the marketplace requires that they adopt the "in" vocabulary. They are responding to a market demand while not buying into the program.

Take the case of a small service company that I once worked with. The president/owner used all of the right words when it came to empowerment and employee involvement, but little things tell a lot about a person's real feelings.

Signs in the Lunchroom

One day, I walked into the lunchroom and noticed that the owner has put up a sign. It was a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy, so the quality wasn't very good, but the words on the sign spoke volumes about his management style.

The sign read: THE FLOGGINGS WILL CONTINUE UNTIL MORALE IMPROVES. It was the only sign in the entire office that had been personally posted by him.

Not wanting to overreact, I questioned the owner regarding the sign. He assured me that his people knew him well enough to accept it as the joke it was intended to

be. He proclaimed not to subscribe to this philosophy, but found a great deal of humor in the message.

Surreptitiously, I asked the employees about the sign. In general, the response I received was a rolling of the eyes with no spoken comment. That is except for one person who said that she understood how the staff could be offended by the wording, especially since the owner made a point of emphasizing that the company's goal was to treat everyone fairly and equitably.

Because of this, I approached the owner again and made my case for changing the message. He didn't totally agree with me, but said that he would do something about it.

The next day, I walked into the lunchroom and the sign had been removed. In its place was a handwritten sign which said: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET? This was an improvement, but not what I ultimately had in mind. However, at least the owner was now thinking about the subtle nuances of what he was saying to his staff.

Talk is not only cheap, but also meaningless when other indicators suggest that spoken the words aren't supported by internal commitment.

Data Plates

Contrast that to the case of an international heavy equipment manufacturer whose president became fully immersed in communicating with his staff. After several small group discussions, he realized that plant workers felt divorced from customers.

When a piece of equipment was manufactured and delivered, the people who fabricated the equipment had no contact with the end-users. Any comments or complaints were filtered through sales and customer service personnel who didn't provide effective feedback.

To change this situation, the president encouraged more employee involvement with customers by changing the company's way of doing business. Data plates on the equipment were enlarged. The names of every employee on the work team whose efforts went into producing the final piece of equipment were engraved on the plate. The record stayed with that unit for its lifetime.

Plus, several weeks after delivery, one of the employees named on the plate called the customer and asked a series of questions that related to design, satisfaction, and service. Prior to this process, the people who produced

the equipment had no contact with the people who used the equipment.

Needless to say, the personal contact had a series of very desirable results. First, the customer was able to ask questions of the work team that could not be answered by customer service or sales personnel.

Next, the work team received real opinions and feedback about its efforts that translated into pride of ownership and better quality work. Finally, the president of the company proved that his commitment to open the channels of communications was more than just words. It was supported by actions that had a positive impact upon the entire company.

Change requires a cultural shift, and involvement from all levels of the organization.

Lip service does not substitute for conviction. Yet, some top managers believe that they can forego empowering their subordinates and still be successful. Top managers may not always say this overtly, but by their actions and their failure to "walk the talk," they reveal their inner opinions.