chapter 3

Above & Beyond: Discretionary Effort™

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The Authors

Discretionary behavior is defined as "that behavior which a person could do if they choose, but for which they would not be punished if they didn't." It is what we commonly refer to as going above and beyond the call of duty. While you will see some of this behavior in all organizations, the percentage of individuals volunteering discretionary effort is one of the most vital indicators of positive leadership. We all know of people who do more than their peers. This is a form of discretionary behavior. Effective leaders know how to elicit this type of performance from a significant number of individuals such that the general characteristics of the organization are those of energy, initiative, and determination.

Leaders Focus on Discretionary Behavior

Will Potter, former president of Preston Trucking, was an exemplar at eliciting discretionary behavior from his employees. One example of this discretionary behavior was demonstrated by a truck driver who, out of work because of the depressed economy, put on a coat and tie and began making sales calls on potential customers in his community for Preston. He expended this effort completely without management involvement or foreknowledge. Another truck driver, on a day when snow prevented him from operating his company vehicle, used his own four-wheel pickup to complete his deliveries.

Military history is replete with victories won by the initiative and heroic efforts of individuals. While the story told may be about the leaders and their armies, the key to the victories is always to be found in how the individual soldiers fought. Similarly, many political leaders whose names have been entered in the annals of history would have accomplished little without the voluntary contributions of their followers. The old saying about leadership, "Where are they going? I must lead them!" has more than a ring of truth to it. In some cases of follower initiative, the most difficult task of the leader is keeping followers focused rather than keeping them motivated.

In all companies you will find individuals who deliver this extra level of performance. In many companies where overall performance is average, the managers whine, "Why can't everyone be like that?" The outstanding performer becomes the standard of comparison in their eyes. Then, everyone else is judged against that standard. Using outstanding performance to criticize other performers is evidence that the manager is no leader.

In marginal companies you often find managers more interested in conformity than in performance. This happens when they attempt to get everyone to adopt some arbitrary practice rather than studying the relationship between behavior and mission accomplishment. We once worked with a company where a pack builder in a fiber manufacturing plant was performing at a level 20% higher than the rest of the shift. His peers complained that he quit producing each day at least two hours before the end of the shift. His manager reproved him for this behavior and required him to "work the whole shift, just like everyone else." His performance quickly dropped to the same level as everyone else's. Finally, when asked why his performance had fallen, he stated that he had always used the last two hours of his shift preparing for the next day, restocking supplies, inspecting his equipment, cleaning, and making other necessary adjustments so that he got a fast quality start each morning. When told by his supervisor to go back to the way he had been working, his performance jumped to almost 25% above the rest of the crew. By initially focusing on the regular procedure and not on specific behavior, this manager risked significant performance losses from this individual.

In excellent companies the exemplary performer becomes not the standard for comparison, but the subject of a root-cause analysis. What is so different for that person? How does his or her behavior differ? Why does it differ? What environmental influences can we identify that can be applied to all performers? Can we enlist the exemplar in the redesign of the work? Since we know from scientific research that behavior is a function of its consequences, we attempt to find the consequences supporting this person's behavior. When answers are found, the organization attempts to create the same conditions for the other performers.

Discretionary behavior is the product of positive reinforcement, never of punishment. Under the conditions of positive reinforcement, when the performer is working to achieve some personal benefit, the behavior can be, and frequently is, long lasting. As long as the benefit is earned and meaningful, the person will keep at the task. Under the conditions of negative reinforcement, the performer may deliver extra effort but the duration and the consistency of that effort will always be suspect. The impulse to escape or to avoid punishment is so powerful when the threat necessary for negative reinforcement is maintained for a long period, that discretionary effort tends to diminish to the point also, applies to sup.

of compliance. You cannot take a snapshot of behavior at any given moment and determine whether it is discretionary or escape-or-avoidance. While both forms of reinforcement can produce extra effort, only positive reinforcement will give an organization the *sustained* characteristics of energy, initiative, and determination.

The best leaders deliver reinforcers to their direct reports but their more pressing concern is to ensure that positive reinforcers are being delivered effectively to all individuals in the organization. Recognizing that reinforcers come from both the task and from management or leadership, leaders must focus on the reinforcement systems. These institutional processes and procedures best ensure that managers are using a management strategy that puts every person's potential first. When workplace activities are intrinsically punishing, the leader must create reinforcers that effectively override the punishment. When this is done in warfare, for example, taking that hill becomes more important to soldiers than the risk of injury or death. For workers in a political campaign, winning the election becomes more important than the flaws they see in their candidate. For performers in an economic enterprise, mission accomplishment becomes more important than the punishers they experience such as lost personal time, problems with suppliers, or conflict with other departments or peers.

Creating discretionary behavior is more difficult for leaders in a hierarchal structure than it is for managers. This is, in part, because the leader must often work through his or her managers. Every layer of management the leader works through increases the complexity of the task. This is because each manager acts as a filter in determining what will be passed on to direct reports. This is not to imply different agendas, competing visions, or willful obstruction, though those factors can also contribute to the problem. Rather, it is simply a matter of the difficulty in understanding and interpreting another person's message. Leaders must find a way to communicate to direct reports and to make sure that the same message reaches all personnel in the organization. This is not an easy task.

good pt for direct contact

CCO visits RBTs face-to-face 1x/month ?

Becoming Like-Minded

We once worked in a computer manufacturing plant where management had an elaborate goal setting and alignment process. As part of our work in helping them execute their strategy, we had each manager create a plan to drive their top four goals. In many instances, managers exceeded their goals in a very short time. Proud of these accomplishments, we took some examples to the senior executive. His reaction puzzled us, as he barely took notice of results that were producing a significant return on investment.

When asked why these results were not important to him, he complained about the beatings he was getting from his boss about late shipments. Knowing that making shipments on time was one of the four original goals for the plant, we began looking for existing behavior-based plans that supported this outcome. There weren't very many. Shocked by this, we created a focus board to help visualize where management attention was being directed.

We created an organizational chart on a wall large enough to include data on over 100 managers. Next, we color-coded each plan as green if it directly supported one of the four plan goals and red if it supported one of the major goals indirectly or not at all. When we were done, the wall was a sea of red. Upon seeing this, our client noted, "Now I know why I feel like the captain of a supertanker trying to dock my ship with a broken rudder."

We have since repeated this focus board exercise in many companies, and frequently find the same results. This inclusion of non-mission-specific initiatives is caused by the fact that managers deliver consequences based on their own priorities. These priorities frequently differ from those of the organization. A common example is when a manager has three of four objectives that directly support the boss's priorities. The fourth, however, is unique to the manager's position. As a result that manager applies consequences differentially, encouraging more attention to the fourth objective, which dilutes the effort put into the first three. By the time this distortion filters through several layers of management, individual goals and consequences bear only a pale resemblance to the original plan.

As we have pointed out, a leader's first and foremost challenge is to obtain discretionary behavior from managers. Implicit in this, however, is gaining the managers' cooperation in implementing a common methodology for obtaining this same discretionary behavior from all other employees. Then the task is to keep that effort focused on the organization's mission and vision.

Sacrifice

What would possess someone to voluntarily leave family and friends and the safety of home to enlist in an army where the pay is poor, the treatment rough, and the risk of permanent injury or death significant? Millions of Americans did exactly this in both World Wars and are still doing it today. We usually attribute this kind of behavior to intrinsic qualities of the individual. We say that they are patriotic, heroic, adventurous, ambitious, or we give them some other label depending on our point of view. If we admire their behavior, we give them positive attributes such as patriotic, courageous, or determined. If we find their behavior in conflict with our views, we label them in a derogatory manner, such as foolhardy, misguided, impetuous, or stupid. Our label, however, does not begin to really answer the question, "Why would they do that?"

In a more business-oriented environment, most people in our society look at salespersons or telemarketers and say, "I could never do that." When we try to find the answers as to why a salesperson or a telemarketer puts up with high levels of rejection, we once again fall prey to the easy answers and say it's because of the money they earn. Easy answers are usually partial and misleading. The truth is that many people who take these types of jobs leave them within a very short time. The money alone, even in large amounts, is not enough to keep them working at a job that includes repeated, daily rejection.

Effective leaders know that money is only a part of the answer to the question, "Why do people do that?" A soldier who fights for the highest bidder is called a mercenary, but most soldiers are far from mercenary. Organizations that expect to survive in the marketplace require more than the transitory allegiance that chasing the money provides. *The leader's function is to give as many people as possible a cause that transcends their financial involvement.*

A good leader gives people a cause they can believe in. That cause, or vision, doesn't have to be extraordinary. It simply has to be something that explains why the things they do each day matter. It provides to the maximum number of people a way to evaluate the choices they make each day so that their choices benefit the company as well as themselves. That vision energizes them to do just a little bit more than they have to because they see the connection between their efforts and the larger group's success.

Leaders create visions that inspire sacrifice. Sacrifice is not the objective, yet the leader's vision often causes the followers to give up things that are enjoyable in the moment in order to advance some objective of the organization. Wise leaders ensure that these sacrifices are noticed and appreciated individually. If these choices are taken for granted, they will soon disappear.

A leader who allows individuals to sacrifice their personal relationships through long hours or to jeopardize their health or their professional futures ultimately loses the opportunity to lead. The kinds of sacrifice that individuals make, however, do not always have such a heavy cost. A salesperson who, instead of quitting at five o'clock makes one more call, or an equipment operator who stays past the end of a shift to make sure that the oncoming workers get off to a quick start, are making sacrifices. The smoker who forgoes a smoke break to get additional tasks done is also making sacrifices. It is a foolish person who considers these behaviors to be requirements rather than choices.

(sacrifices)

The tragedy of most mediocre organizations is that the managers are desensitized to the sacrifices their people make. They take for granted the small, daily choices and treat them as if they were inconsequential. When they don't ignore them, they trivialize them. We have seen, for instance, too many organizations with suggestion programs in which employees' ideas are dismissed in such a way that people learn quickly to keep their ideas to themselves.

The leader, then, not only has to inspire people to make difficult choices in favor of the vision, but also to inspire them to continue making that decision over time. If this choice persists long enough, ultimately employees will not think of their extra efforts as sacrifices but as the way we do things here because they will be the beneficiary of the satisfaction and other rewards associated with success of the organization.

How do you get a large group of people to engage in acts that do not provide them with any immediate, positive benefits so that your objectives are met? How do you get them to make these sacrifices? You focus on the consequences of behavior rather than the results, such as improved customer service, increased quality and productivity, and by giving people a way to personalize and relate to the changes you request.