

Effective Leadership as Barrier Deconstruction

As the world's professions change, the expectations and limits placed on both employers and employees are shifting. Industries today face barriers that are not only numerous, but interconnected and complex. A changing workforce and shifting industry priorities are pressuring leaders to use a certain approach- to decrease the barriers standing in the way of ultimate productivity and success. An effective leader who uses a barrier-deconstruction approach will utilize their position of power to streamline their organization, minimizing obstacles to provide a structure for their employees that fosters collaboration, encourages output and decreases turnover. The big question that our leaders are facing is simple: What is the best way to do this?

One organizational barrier to examine is expanding bureaucracy or bloated administration. The primary complaint around expanding bureaucracy is that it can limit productivity and erode resources. Layers of red-tape can lead to employee frustration and lessened output, as well as waste valuable employee time. Coleen Rowley speaks of this additional red tape at the FBI, and cleverly labels it "make work-paperwork" (Rowley, 2002). Eggen's take on Rowley's statement demonstrates the evident frustration at the FBI bureaucracy, including being "...hampered at every turn by bureaucrats in Washington, who allegedly resisted seeking a warrant, sought to micromanage the case and admonished the field agents when, in desperation, they turned to the CIA for help." (Eggen, 2002). Bureaucracy can be limited in different ways, including lessening employee paperwork, acquiring the right human assets and streamlining management hierarchies. In "Good to Great", Jim Collins notes that carefully chosen human assets are ways to increase company discipline and deflate bureaucracy. Leaders who successfully cultivate a culture of discipline are much more likely to perform (Collins, 2001).

One major group of cultural barriers that plague organizations are attributed to work-life balance. Barriers to employees achieving work-life balance are issues in their life outside of the workplace preventing efficiency and focus. Work-life balance is a concept that many industries are attempting to address, often to little success. There exists opposite driving forces to both increase output/personal communication while simultaneously offering employees opportunities like on-site personal services, vacation/benefits and professional development. The challenge many executives face is to promote productivity while decreasing chances for life to draw employees away from their work.

Personnel at companies like Infosys Technologies acknowledge a key to their success is retaining highly trained employees, and achieving a corporate work-life balance is one way to keep them. Ravindra Muthya, head of Education and Research at Infosys acknowledges the resources poured into training workers, and honestly states, "...We can't lose them." (Schlosser, 2006). At SAS, the corporation prides itself on the ability to retain trained employees, highlighted by the impressive statistic: "...the average SAS employee tenure is 9.5 years, compared to an industry average of 3.68 years." (SAS Institute, 2017).

The organization-wide creation of a work-life balance can feel contrived, especially when the benefits permeate the culture. A leader who has managed to effectively tackle this barrier while building a productive yet balanced culture is Jim Goodnight, CEO of SAS. At SAS, the company has prioritized work-life balance through a shorter 35 hour work week, on-site childcare and health providers, and generous perks. Goodnight believes that SAS should support an organizational culture that values productivity, minimizes wasted resources and encourages employee longevity. He has effectively removed the barriers that can so often stand in the way of employees, and has done so with humility and strength.

In my career, I have encountered one example of leaders who successfully removed barriers for their employees, and another that did not. I taught at Excel Academy, a charter school in a poor community near Boston. Excel had been structured to maximize student productivity, minimize wasted teacher time, and increase teacher capabilities through consistent Professional Development time and institutional support. Excel was an incredible place to work; employees knew what the expectations were and how to achieve success. We were led by a strategic team of administrators who worked hard, communicated well and led by example. They were leaders who could address barriers teachers were encountering quickly, and often resolve difficult challenges in days or weeks: issues like chaotic dismissal schedules, lack of working computer equipment, and implementing student support plans. We followed organizational norms that encouraged us to indicate barriers for our leaders to address, and felt completely supported and valued by our superiors.

This environment contrasted with my work in Bozeman, Montana, where I worked with a small team to run the local Children's Museum. My position was Director of Education, and I worked with other Directors to run daily operations. The staff team worked together fluidly and effectively, and was managed by a well-intentioned but disorganized Board of Directors. The leadership that came from the BOD was vision-focused, but often felt fragmented, vague and impractical to staff. The BOD did not focus on removing barriers to increase productivity or streamline museum operations; in fact, most of their suggestions seemed to culminate in the opposite effect. Suggestions from our top leadership often produced more work, but not necessarily productive work. The lack of effort from the BOD to lead through removing barriers for staff led to more bureaucracy, decreased work-life balance and ultimately, staff turnover.

Works Cited

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