

Case: Performance Management

Brent Q. Gardner

Brent Gardner is having a bad day in the middle of a bad month in the midst of a crummy year in what looks like the wrong career choice altogether. Today the news came down that all midlevel managers and below will need to reapply for their jobs. Of course, they will change all the job titles and shuffle the responsibilities, but no one is fooled. The big guys found yet another way to downsize without the appearance of being a pack of corporate serial killers.

In earlier times, with better staff performance, this kind of hazing wouldn't have worried him in the least. Brent always hits or exceeds his numbers as a source of pride and with an eye toward survival. He knows that in corporate politics, if you can't dazzle your way up the ladder at Alpha Beta Surety, great productivity and profitability numbers are the next best thing. It takes hard work to get them, but while some rest on their laurels, Brent rests on his numbers.

But the numbers aren't working for him lately. Recent shakeouts in the insurance business have promoted him to what he fears is his level of incompetence. He is now in charge of a subrogation unit – the group that parses out who owes whom what in liability settlements – of one hundred people; ten teams of ten apiece. And most of them are failing to make their goals.

By any measure, Brent's department is in trouble. Productivity is down; claims paid are up; customers are angry; subrogation units from other companies say his teams are easy marks – they hardly ever fight a counterclaim; department morale is in the cellar; and turnover is high. Quotas are low, lower than ever, and they still don't hit their numbers. Nothing is working for Brent. He is 48 years old and as of today, looks like he is due for a career change.

He has a month to turn things around, and panic is the calmest feeling in his emotional spectrum. There isn't any point to scheduling meetings with all the teams until he figures out what the problem is, so Brent has been to see the resident organization development specialist. She suggested he make a list of what each team

did well and find ways to encourage his people to do more of the same.

No way will Brent have time for all that fluffy, touchy feely analysis and he certainly can't turn things around in 30 days without tackling problems instead of mouthing platitudes and playing with woo-woo panaceas. But he decides to do at least part of what she suggested: he will jot down the characteristics of both his best and his worst teams and see if the contrast will clear anything up in his own mind.

Team two is his gem. They do everything right and are a joy to deal with, so much so that many of them have become Brent's friends over the years. Matter of fact, Linda the team leader, named Brent godfather to her son when he was born 12 years ago. The team members are mostly energetic and focused, and they know the value of friendly competition. They work together like the Chicago Bulls in their heyday. The team has its top performers, but no one has any illusions they could do as well alone as a team. They are willing to work hard and put in extra hours when necessary. In fact, he sometimes worries they work too much, but with the lousy productivity of the other teams, he appreciates the extra effort. Politically, this group is sharp. They know how to look good in front of upper management and how to make him look good, too. They network with other teams well, both inside and outside the department and they still can handle the competition. Most of them belong to the same downtown gym, and they often get together after workouts. If he could put this team on the copy machine, he would make nine copies, and his job would be saved.

On the other hand, every time Brent looks at a team nine, he is reminded of a cat fight. They are notorious for their knock down drag out, shouting over the cubicles like it's the trading floor at the stock exchange. It is worse when they are silent. That means they are beyond fighting and aren't even talking; they are pouting. That also means they aren't working, at least not productively. Everything team two does right team nine screws up. He can't take them out in public, and they don't play well with other teams.

Sometimes he thinks team nine's high turnover is a blessing, a way to get rid of the troublemakers, but it never seems to work out that way. There is always more than enough trouble on the team and enough troublemakers, and with the burgeoning labor shortage, the pickings in the labor market are getting leaner.

On paper at least, most of team nine's members are salvageable. They are bright, enthusiastic workers he personally likes. They are constantly requesting transfers to another team, and though he feels sorry for them, he can't justify the move.

Team nine's battles concern technology, interpersonal communication, hours, and work assignments. A couple of members are highly adept internet users with no patience for the 'dinosaurs'. Of course, it doesn't help that the extreme technogeeks are the same ones who show up late for work, leave early, and won't work overtime. They are notorious for not following directions, which grates on the nerves of some members of the team more than others and sometimes on his nerves as well. Their teammates complain that the technogeeks don't listen, exhibiting such behavior as typing email messages while another team mate is trying to have a heart to heart conversation with them.

The geeks have a point, especially about procedures. Some members of team nine are such sticklers for details and doing things by the book that it drives Brent and the rest of the team nuts. These same folks are so enamored with face to face, or at least voice to voice, contact that they refuse to leave or return voice mail messages. The upshot, Brent believes, is that they are missing a lot of opportunities to get things done efficiently. When it comes to the internet, forget about it. The technophobes only do what they are told, and they rarely come up with new approaches. They see technology as a way of hiding from confrontation and favor taking on the enemy one to one, hot and heavy. Their touchstone seems to be, "We've always done it this way." The good news: They always show up on time and are willing to go the extra mile.

Then there is the rest of the team - the vocal majority. Generally good individual performers, they are extremely judgmental and intolerant of the other two, often warring, contingents – the technogeeks and the technophobes. Their complaints, brought directly to Brent instead of to Devon, their team leader, echo Brent's own frustrations. They are hardest on the newest members of the team. They accuse them of a poor work ethic, loathsome interpersonal skills, and an unjustified 'What's in it for me?' attitude. Those in the vocal majority complain that the technogeeks want to change everything faster than anyone could adapt to and that the technophobes don't want to change at all. The vocal majority knows change has to occur, and they believe they

know exactly how to accomplish it, if only the other two sides would just listen.

To get another spin on things, Brent sets up a meeting with Linda and Devon, the leaders of teams two and nine, respectively. As he walks through his assessment of the two teams, Linda preens and gloats – subtly, of course. Devon erupts all over the room: “Of course those guys do it ‘right’ all the time. They’re Boomers. You’re a boomer. It all fits. If I was a Boomer, I could be just like all of you, and everything would be great. But I’m not a Boomer, and I don’t want to be, even if it means losing my job. You’re all absorbed in yourselves and your work and your way of doing things. It sucks. I’ve got news for you. I’m not managing people like Linda’s.”

A 200 watt light bulb suddenly sears the inside of Brent’s head. It is true: nearly all of the members of team two are in their forties. A few are older, but they are good soldiers who generally do what they are told and have been around Alpha Beta for a while.

On the other hand, team nine is a virtual menagerie of generations. By and large, the technophobes are the elders on the team, and, of course, the geeks are the young ones. Then there is the vocal majority – solidly Boomers, all five of them.

Team nine, Brent realizes, may well be a microcosm of the problems on most of his other teams. Luckily, most of the others aren’t as vociferous, contentious, and just plain obstreperous. If he can help Devon’s team, he’s sure he can turn the whole department around.

What would you do in Brent’s shoes?