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People First

Recession causes business community to refocus on relationships

Know how to cultivate loyalty of key employees or clients: It's all about feeling valued
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Something great happened in 2009. Alan B. Stein with BKD CPAs & Advisors, one of the area's leading career consultants, reminded us, "It's not what you know, it's who you know and what they believe about you."

In the new year, people are going to think about associations differently and consider both existing and new initiatives before they leap into relationships. Leaders will have to consider this new pace in every aspect of business. Existing relationships both internally (employees) and externally (clients) will require a higher level of deliberation, because as the economy stabilizes, more opportunities will make themselves available.

If you haven't considered this before, now is the time to take a long hard look into these critical areas of working relationships and consider: Who are the people that make my business successful? Do they feel appreciated? Time and time again, it has been proved that money does not buy loyalty.

Instead, the best and brightest require they be heard and listened to — in other words, they need to feel valued.

Tips to make a person feel valued

- Look people in the eye when you talk to them. You would be surprised the people who don't. Smile and say hello.
- Acknowledge sacrifices. We are all a little bruised coming out of 2009. Let people know you realize their efforts and are grateful.
- Find opportunities to spread the good word. Tell a third party about the extraordinary efforts of another person. People like to stand out in the herd. If we are seen, then there is more likelihood that we will get what we need both physically and emotionally. Be known for being a champion of other people's successes.

Carolyn Savage was the third person Mary Kay Nash hired. Her amazing career spanned more than 40 years. Ebby Halliday, a fan of Carolyn's, never failed to send Carolyn a note along with a news clipping each and every time her name was in print. Is the current corporate culture supportive of these people? Do you as their leader understand what your employees and clients need to feel supported?

Ask yourself:

- How do I continually send clear, concise messages through the ranks? Employees transmit consciously and unconsciously the attitudes and behaviors of the company's leaders.
- How would my employees rate me in regard to keeping everyone on the same page while we moved through 2009?
- How do I gather the thoughts, ideas and concerns of the people around me and effectively use that information to better the company?

Human beings are a creative group. Wanting to know what's going to happen next is so overwhelming that, left with little or no information, we will simply create the worst possible scenario and then behave as if it's true.

We can't be careful enough while cultivating relationships to first be purposeful in what we want to communicate and then deliver the message considerately.

Best practices

Are your current methods of business development still relevant? One of the area's leading local economists, Bernard "Bud" Weinstein, says: "We are the luckiest people in America to be living in Dallas. History has proven that we are and will continue to be a major growth area. Business cycles will slowly pick up momentum in 2010, but bringing new business to the table will require diligent calculation and a steady hand."

Time is money, and if business cycles are going to take longer to develop, it's vital that leaders do not miss a step.

Steps toward being thoughtful:

- A small bouquet of flowers sent at the right moment might be more effective than a great dinner invitation. Think timing.
- Building solid relationships requires thought. Albert Einstein said, "I'm not really that bright, I just think on things longer than most people do." A shotgun approach is rarely effective and, more often than not, wounds the target. Know specifically all you can before you approach — have a sense of who they are individually and how you see them fitting into the organization. After you do all this, then make your move. Here's a clue that you're ready: You will know where they like to have lunch.
- Use what you already have in a better way. Every business person has a data management system. Everyone does business lunches. Do you note beverage choices or other subtle social behaviors? Years ago, I landed a major contract because I wrote down how the person liked his Starbucks coffee, and at our next meeting I had one waiting for him. The cost: \$3.57.

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