Manage Up to Improve Performance

Cultural shift to a positive workplace is possible

By Quint Studer

A critical task in getting organizations aligned is teaching leaders how to quit playing the "blame game" and start positioning others—individuals, departments, and so forth—in a positive light. That's managing up. We all need to learn to manage up ourselves, as well as managing up our employees, our leaders, and our organizations.

Managing up eliminates the we/they phenomenon, which is the primary reason employees and customers lose confidence in the organization. It's an easy trap to fall into. Often, the we/they game has been going on inside an organization for so long that its leaders don't even recognize it.

Leaders Need Training, Too

Few of us were educated to be leaders. Rather, we have leadership thrust upon us. Instead of choosing our first management position, many of us literally fall into it or have it fall on us. Go to a construction site and ask somebody why he's laying brick. Chances are he or she won't say, "Well, I'm just doing brickwork so someday I can be a foreman."

Common sense tells us that most of us start out looking for jobs that involve tasks that we enjoy. Then, somewhere along the line, we end up in a leadership position. More times than not, it's because our boss quit. The organization needs to fill the position quickly, so we get the call.

This lack of training means many leaders don't know how to explain and carry messages to employees. It's a shortcoming that can be disastrous. Why? Because the way messages are communicated within an organization is critical to that organization's culture.

There are two types of corporate cultures: those divided by blame and finger-pointing, and those united by teamwork and shared responsibility.

The We/They Phenomenon

Playing the we/they card hurts an organization and its leadership. What is the we/they card? Basically, it's making oneself look better at the expense of others. For example:

Let's say I am an untrained (or inadequately trained) leader. The pay raises in my organization have been in the 3 percent range because that's what was approved for this year. Oh, I may have had some 3.1 percent and 2.8 percent increases, but most were right at 3 percent.

A member of my staff, Rick, comes up to me and says, "You know, Quint, I'm really upset. I've worked harder this year than ever before, but I got the same pay raise as everyone else. I thought I deserved more."

My response is something like this: "Rick, I can understand how you feel." (After all, I want to show empathy, right?) "If it were up to me, it wouldn't have been like that,"

I continue. "But you know pay raises are really out of my hands. That's something that human resources dictates." (Or, same tune, different lyrics, "That's something that comes from corporate headquarters.")

See what I've done? I've just made the employee feel better. He may even see me as his friend. Unfortunately, I've done it at the expense of another department or my boss. I didn't respond this way because I wanted to put down human resources. I did this because I didn't know how not to do it.

I firmly believe leaders want to do a good job. However, most of us don't get the training we need to make it happen. It's quite possible to play the we/they card subconsciously. We don't intend to subtly shift the blame, but we do so anyway, and for the most human of reasons: to make other people like us.

The we/they phenomenon, however, is destructive and divisive. Good leadership can keep it in check. The key is providing managers with the training required to drive results. It is about values. A value-driven organization trains its leaders.

The Art of Managing Up

So, how do we prevent we/they? The answer is that we look for ways to manage up. Essentially, managing up is positioning something or someone in a positive light. For example:

> When you're talking to your boss, be sure to tell her about an employee who has done a good job. By relaying an employee's positive efforts, the boss can come out and say, "Kathy, I was talking to Mike, and I asked which employees are doing a particularly good job. He specifically mentioned you, Kathy. He mentioned the fact that you had a tight timeline on a project and you turned it around quickly. Kathy, I would just like to thank you for your dedication!"

What has happened? Well, by getting Kathy's name from Mike, the boss has reinforced positive behavior—and reinforced and recognized behavior gets repeated. She not only managed up Kathy, but she also managed up Mike in the eyes of Kathy and the rest of the staff.

A big part of managing up is refraining from managing down. Now, obviously, few leaders would deliberately manage down a person or an event at their organizations. Often, we take the "no comment" approach. But human nature being what it is, people often take the liberty of assuming the worst.

Leaders need to find ways to position positively and we need to be proactive about it.

Managing up is a conscious, ongoing effort. Whether you realize it or not, you see managing up all the time. Take the restaurant industry. When a server waits on you, instead of just pointing to a blackboard with the daily specials, he or she says, "I tried today's pasta special before my shift and it's fabulous." You walk away feeling positive about the restaurant. Why? Because the server did a good job of managing up and positioning the restaurant, the chef, and the food.

According to research, it takes a ratio of three positives to one criticism for one human being in the workplace to feel good about another human being. The truth is, managing up—positioning people in a positive light—is somewhat counter-cultural. It may not come naturally, but it is worth the effort. It makes everyone feel better about themselves, their bosses, their co-workers, and the organization.

Creating the Cultural Shift

You may be wondering how you'll ever get your employees and colleagues (and maybe yourself) to reject we/they and embrace managing up. Don't worry. It's definitely doable. You can create a cultural shift in your organization that will change everything. Here's how:

1. *Conduct employee attitude surveys.* These management tools give you a good idea of how strong a hold the we/they has on your organization. Plus, taking a survey will allow you to get some benchmarks by which you can measure your progress in changing your corporate culture from one of blame to one of shared accountability and teamwork.

2. *Send scouting reports to your boss.* A scouting report outlines department accomplishments, cites involved employees by name and suggests a good time for the boss to stop by. A scouting report eases the boss's anxiety, makes his or her visits more productive, and generally facilitates managing up in your organization. Instead of telling the boss just what's wrong in your areas, give the boss the good news, too. A scouting report detailing what your people are doing is likely to motivate the boss to visit more often and become more visible.

3. *Send regular notes to the bosses.* Bosses want to know whom to reward and recognize. Don't be afraid to drop your boss a note. Tell the boss the name of an employee to whom you would like him or her to send a note and include the specific

behavior or accomplishment you would like the boss to write about. And suggest that he or she send it to the employee's home. You've just managed up the employee to the boss, who, when he or she writes the note, will say the information was received from you.

4. *Help employees develop key words.* You want your front-line employees to tell the customer that your service is the best and that the people behind the scenes are doing a great job. Even if it's uncomfortable at first, you will find that the customer appreciates it.

Meet with your front-line employees and make sure they understand the services your organization provides, as well as the roles and qualifications of those who help provide the service. Teach them how to communicate this to the customer in a way that feels comfortable and natural.

5 *Continually emphasize honest, open communication between employees.* The reality is we've got to be able to have adult conversations in the workplace. If there is a problem or issue, it is best that the two affected parties discuss it first between themselves. If they can't reach resolution, then it's time to bring in the boss. Otherwise, the problem gets caught up in the organizational chart and never handled.

6. *Develop written department feedback systems, to open dialogue and move the organization forward.* Written

feedback systems allow all employees to know each other's departmental goals and objectives. Such feedback also helps eliminate passive-aggressive behavior between departments.

When two departments have to evaluate each other on a weekly basis, they are forced to talk out the issues and modify their operational goals. As a department head, I have to write my name on the evaluation. My boss sees it and so do you. Now, if I rank you too high, then I can't use you as an excuse to my boss anymore. So, I'm probably going to rank you accurately. The first time I give you that 3 when you think you're a 5, we'll have a talk. It may not be pleasant, but it's best to get difficult conversations out of the way early on. ■

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