



'Enterprise' your employees to beat market conditions

Seek out, encourage workers' ideas



By Rick Speckmann



To beat market conditions, “enterprise” your employees.

OK, the weight of the “recession” market is squeezing the lifeblood out of our 2008 forecasts. As the lyric goes, “We got trouble, right here in river city” (“the Music Man”). Most of you have been through these “re-forecasting” economies before and if you think about it there is one immutable law that stimulates intelligent optimism: “This will pass.”

Unfortunately, optimism alone won't get you there. As you reflect over previous market recoveries there is another such law: “Things will be different.” Those that manage for “difference” will be tomorrow's market leaders.

Recession economies are like the forces of nature. It is the old forest that must succumb to fire in order to birth the new, mightier forest. We will witness innumerable start-ups sprung from recession induced employee cast-offs and from lifestyle transformations of frustrated employees who are convinced that entrepreneurship is the new forest. I have spent most of my life in and around entrepreneurs. I have worked in nine dif-

ferent industries and chartered four start-ups. I get the excitement and the selection scrutiny of venture capitalists who are eagerly awaiting some brilliant launches.

Appealing as the concept might be, entrepreneurship is not for everybody. It requires the elements of adventure, high personal and financial risk, total absorption in your vision, a touch of A.D.D. and blind optimism. True entrepreneurs are difficult if not impossible to manage. They are a rarity. If you are one of them and are working for someone else, it is inevitable that you will eventually jump ship; in some cases without a life jacket. In business settings, I prefer “enterprising” employees rather than entrepreneurial types throughout a company.

Enterprising skills are recognized in the people who are constantly looking for new and better ways to achieve success within the framework of the company. They may not necessarily know it, but they are incredibly opportunistic. This talent is not limited to marketing or sales professionals. It is not simply a matter of being a “high-energy” person.

High-energy people are not necessarily the best for enterprising behavior. In fact, some of the finest enterprising employees I have met are positioned in operations, IT and finance. Enterprising cultures are based on a “lean” dogma of continuous improvement throughout every aspect the company engages. The companies that emerge strongest from this economy will be those that prospered through enterprising thinking and execution.

It is a shame that this one dimension within the company is so poorly encouraged by management. Therein lays your

opportunity.

The good news is that there are far more enterprising capable people in the company than entrepreneurs. The key to leveraging enterprise benefits in your company is determined by three factors:

Requirement: Commitment by management

There is nothing worse than stimulating the minds of your employees and then not taking action on some of the ideas. Enterprising behavior is a strategic action within the company and must be treated as such. If the track is to engage enterprise thinking, then you must know how to define it, show how you will implement it and most importantly you must determine a reward and recognition program for those that contribute.

This requires a variety of resources. Management needs to know how to evaluate recommendations, and must talk the talk of enterprise initiatives. I have worked with CEO's and marketing professionals who truly lack the enterprising gene. Thankfully there were other people in the company who made the contribution. My message to company leaders: The more you make enterprising behavior a disciplined process, the more likely people will participate.

Fact of life: Enterprising behavior is not universal

First of all, I will suggest from my experience with more than 20,000 job candidates and hundreds of people I have worked with and managed, that many of the “enterprise gifted” employees are “sleepers.” You simply wouldn't recognize that trait because, most often,

the job roles or the managers and supervisors suppress this type of thinking. Interestingly enough, I have worked with assessments that will identify this trait and that certainly gives management a leg up on building an enterprising culture.

You certainly will be able to identify certain employees because they are the ones who make noise and will push for their idea. However, that is a small percentage of the population and some of your best contributors will come from the “reserved personality” ranks.

I particularly remember a small company planning session that involved 25 employees. Emily, an accounting and collections person, just about knocked the CEO off of his chair with her burst of “brainstorming” ideas that were highly enterprising and beneficial to the company. Later over a beer, he confessed, “I would never have guessed she had it in her.”

In an interview I can usually discover the level of enterprising acuity because there are questions that will help isolate that type of behavior. The behavior is not just isolated to the office. Some people find their enterprising outlet in their volunteer roles as well. To bad it doesn't show up at the company.

Management must set aside bias and dig deeper to expose this golden vein in each employee. If there was ever a time for the authentic “open door” policy, it is now. Employees must experience a positive reception and not the “that won't work” reaction that so often permeates the manager mindset.

Rule: Train, talk the talk, walk the talk

The enterprising mind is a muscle that must be conditioned for output. This requires training. A person predisposed to be an enterprising thinker is capable but rarely skilled. Someone in the management team who has consistently demonstrated enterprising proficiency should take on the role of “champion.” Employees need to understand the definition of enterprising, and then must be coached on how to take an idea and work it into the framework of the company brand and processes.

The key to employee success is their understanding how to take an idea and move it into a plan that yields true benefit. In every reasonable situation, employees must be reminded and encouraged that there might be a better way to drive value into the company and market. To walk the talk requires a sys-

tem of recognition and reward. Successful enterprising programs deliver value in the form of profit and energy for the company. Companies that neglect rewarding enterprising behaviors will snuff out the candle of employee fulfillment and most likely will lose a valuable employee.

A company that commits to the “enterprising” disciplines is committing to a culture shift that must be consistently sustained. Employees that cannot “catch on” do not have to go away. If they are solid contributors, they remain an integral part of the company.

But in a period of economic challenge, the intelligent company will uniquely leverage its assets. The human asset remains the most under utilized asset in companies today. It's the wrong time to be leaving money on the table.

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