

ARE WE EXCUSE MAKERS OR PROBLEM SOLVERS?

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A couple of months ago, I was sitting through the parent meeting for my son's basketball program. The coach talked about the upcoming season but focused most of his discussion about parental conduct and character-building elements of their program. It was a sharp reminder that the parents needed to keep their personal opinions in check and let the kids have fun. From academic to athletic, it was one of the best presentations I have seen from any of my children's areas of involvement. I was most impressed by the coach emphasizing work ethic and the shaping of these young boys. One of the goals of his program, from 5th grade all the way through high school, is to teach the boys to be "problem solvers, not excuse makers". Although he related it to their involvement with basketball, I was struck how this simple concept resonated through many aspects of professional life. What kind of culture are we fostering in our organizations?

I was so struck by this simple statement, excuse maker or problem solver, that I was sure that it came from some noted leadership guru. Unfortunately, I could not locate the source, but I was shocked at the wide-ranging reference to the concept. From describing classroom teaching styles to entrepreneurship, it seemed as though this notion resonated with several folks who like to craft their opinions in the written word. I hope that I can do it justice.

As I relate this concept back to the world of distribution, my first thought was how this mentality can affect the performance of the sales team. I am sure that you are mentally walking through the individuals that

make up the revenue generating side of your organization. The excuse makers are always blaming a lack of performance on something outside of their perceived control. They blame the purchasing people for not buying right. They blame the manufacturer for not having the perfect product for their customer's application. They blame the warehouse for not shipping right. Furthermore, they love to blame management for allowing the company to get so screwed up. Someone needs to remind these Negative Nancys that when you are pointing your finger at others, there are still three fingers pointing back at you.

When faced with a salesperson complaining how tough competition was the reason for poor performance, one of my favorite clients used to challenge this person with a simple statement, "Would you rather be us competing against them, or them competing against us?". With this statement, which he would have to bring out from time to time, he would help the individual take inventory of the arrows in their own quiver. In his own way, he would begin to make the shift from excuse maker to problem solver.

I see this lack of personal resourcefulness rear its ugly head in our warehouse operations as well. How many times have you heard warehouse managers blame careless mistakes and missed deadlines on being "too busy"? Hold up there partner. Doesn't being busy generally mean that we are generating more transactions? Doesn't an increased transactional load generally mean that we are producing more revenue in the organization? And doesn't said revenue generally find its

way to your paycheck? Hmmm, maybe it's not a bad thing to be busy.

I regularly hear branch manager complain about a lack of space making it difficult for them to be operationally efficient. While I don't totally rule out the idea that poor inventory management and escalating growth can put a strain on the four walls, creative leaders will always find a way to work with the cards they are dealt. Most distributors carry at least 35% more inventory than they need to satisfy their customer base. Why not start there? Modern material handling equipment and racking can substantially increase pallet space efficient slotting. Why not invite someone in to show you the possibilities? Solving operational challenges is not a talking point. It is an action step.

Somewhere in the middle of sales and operations, we have the utilization of technology. Everybody loves to blame their lack of, or obsolete, technology as a major contributor to all things wrong with the company. In every consulting engagement I perform, someone inevitably complains about their crappy software. Most of the time, the software is just fine. The users have not taken the time to understand the capacities of the product. Did you know that most distributors utilize less than 15% of the features of their chosen ERP? What percentage did they pay for? Quit complaining and learn how to use the tool.

As much as I have tried to get people out of the blame game in this article, I am going to point my finger in one direction – leadership. Although much of this blame first mentality

was probably developed at an early age, many leaders have not done their organizations any favors. Developing a culture of problem solvers takes a conscious effort on the part of leadership. Do we allow people to learn from failure, or do we create systems to dumb down the process? When our employees come to us for answers to situational challenges, do we let them off the hook and provide the solution? Are we engaging in blame behavior ourselves? If we want our people to perform at a high level, we must show others how to remove obstacles. We must give our people the latitude to make operational decisions. We must make the goal, not the path, the most important principle in our success.

I wish that changing behavior was as easy as gathering a bunch of parents together and crafting an emotionally appealing speech. Trust me, we are all willing to cede our child rearing responsibilities over to someone else. In the business world, changing behavior is a hands-on task. Guiding our people to seek the solution, rather than dwell on the problem, is a never-ending battle. Are our rules and policies getting in the way of creativity? As the leader of the organization, be relentless in the removal of barriers. You have all the raw materials to be successful. It's time to look in the mirror – are you an excuse maker or a problem solver?

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. Last year, he launched his first podcast, Distribution Talk. Episodes can be found at www.distributiontalk.com and most podcast applications. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com