Your Greatest Untapped Asset
By Jason Bader, Principal

When we think of assets in an organization, our thoughts generally lean toward the accounting definitions. We have cash tied up in inventory and accounts receivable. We have cash tied up in equipment or other fixed assets. And, we have cash tied up in, well, cash. These are all perfectly acceptable definitions of organizational assets. Unfortunately, when we tend to take this clinical approach, we fail to recognize the greatest untapped asset of all – the collective creativity of the people who work with us and for us.

Creativity comes from the confidence in one's strengths and ability. This ability may be a byproduct of your education. It may come from past work experience or even from on the job training in your current position. The point is that everyone is given the innate ability to be creative based on past experiences, but they do not always have the confidence to express their thoughts. This is the untapped resource. As a leader, it is incumbent upon you to help coach your employees to explore and utilize their talents. To do so, we just might have to give up a little control.

Over the course of your career, you have been exposed to several types of authority figures. Everyone has met the BOSS – Boisterous, Omnipotent, Self-indulgent, Sociopath. This definition was given to me by my good friend and colleague Dr. Rick Johnson of ceostrategist.com. The boss is consumed with control. They direct rather than coach. They berate rather than explain. Their edicts begin with "I" versus "We". Frankly, this style of management is exhausting. Not only do they have to make all the decisions, they find themselves constantly looking for more victims caused by a high degree of turn over. Don't get me wrong, there are sometimes when the "boss" has to come out. We would just prefer that it is rare sighting.

This type of management style is a creativity killer. Why would a team member want to offer up their own opinion? The boss is so fearful of losing control that they do everything in their power to avoid input. In their mind, inviting others to make decisions is a sign of weakness. It means that somehow they are failing to meet the requirements of their job. Furthermore, they are deathly afraid that someone will find out that they don't always have the answer. As irrational as it sounds here on paper, many organizations are rife with fear based management.

On the contrary, servant style leaders recognize the potential in the collective creativity. Rather than fear the input of their team, they encourage it. As my friend Abe WalkingBear Sanchez, a noted thinker in organizational efficiencies, says, "thinking should not only be encouraged, it should be a condition of employment."

The servant style leader understands the power in humility. Many confuse humility with humiliation. The two could not be more different. My favorite definition of humility is this: the ability to remain teachable. The humble leader recognizes that they do not have all the answers. As is often the case, their direct reports are closer to the situation and have the best opportunity to offer a solution.

The servant style leader inspires others to reach their potential. A good leader does not have to possess all the operational skill sets to run the organization. They must be able to surround themselves with the people who excel in these operational functions and inspire them to achieve success. The leader must have enough confidence in themselves to allow others to shine in areas they may not have expertise in. Are the best sales managers necessarily the best sales people? Of course not, they understand how to

draw out and nurture the skills in others. When a manager moves past the desire for self-recognition, they are well on their way to becoming a leader.

Can managers employ a servant style leadership approach? If they ever want to take a vacation, they will need to depend on the abilities of their team. Managers are often charged with creating standards, measuring performance and generally insuring that the status quo is maintained. Yes, there are growth goals to be achieved, but those can never be realized without the full support of their team.

If a manager wants to become a good leader, they must be willing to give up control. Furthermore, they must quit providing answers to every situation or opportunity presented during the day. When an employee comes into the office with a problem, the natural tendency is to give direction and move on. This is the path of least resistance. Unfortunately, we have now told that employee that they are no longer required to solve problems for themselves. This type of behavior stifles creativity and promotes laziness. It also makes it very difficult to develop promotable employees.

The tougher, but ultimately more fruitful, option is to invite input. When presented with a situation, turn away from the computer and get ready for a learning opportunity. Once you are able to give the employee your full attention, I want you to ask your direct report, "How do you think we should handle it?" or "What do you think we should do?" Here is where the biting of tongue must come into play. Whatever suggestion they respond with, unless it will cause grave bodily harm or financial ruin, your response should be, "Ok. Let's give it a shot." For the manager with control issues, this will be a monumental exercise in self-restraint. I get it. It's hard to let others run with a solution that differs from your own. This redirection of a situation is the first step in getting your team members to think for themselves. Over time, they will become more confident in handling opportunities.

When I ask managers to list the biggest challenges they face, time management is always near the top. Nearly all of them want to become more proactive versus reactive. Becoming more visionary is a great goal – if you can carve out the time. Of course they don't have the time. They are so busy reacting to the situations their employees dump on their desk, they will never have the opportunity to look at the bigger picture. When the employees start pulling their weight in the thinking department, the manager will be able to free up time to become a better leader. Does anyone see the chicken or the egg here?

An empowering leader is primarily focused on the goal. The path is a secondary concern. There are many ways to solve a problem, just as there are many ways to skin a cat. The fear based manager will insist on their path being the only method. They have simply reversed the priorities here. When the path becomes more important than the goal, creativity is stifled. When we put the goal above the path, the organization can finally begin to tap into its greatest asset of all – the collective creativity of the team. Good luck and I am always here to help.

About the Author:
Jason Bader is the managing partner of The Distribution Team, a firm that specializes in helping distributors become more profitable through strategic planning and operating efficiencies. The first 20 years of his career were spent working as a distribution executive. Today, he is a regular speaker at industry events and spends much of his time coaching individual distribution companies. For more information, call (503) 282-2333 or contact him by e-mail at Jason@Distributionteam.com. Also visit The Distribution Team's website at www.thedistributionteam.com.