

A WINNING BUSINESS ATTITUDE

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Top managers set the tone for all the other managers and employees in a business. A winning business attitude comes from the top. People lower in a business cannot overcome pessimism, incompetence, negativism and lack of leadership from the top. Seven key characteristics describe which top managers are most likely to build winning business attitudes. Managers with the following characteristics build winning attitudes:

1. Plan makers
2. Information users
3. Opportunity seekers
4. Risk takers
5. People helpers
6. Organization builders
7. Enthusiastic learners

Plan makers - Paraphrasing Dwight Eisenhower - Plans cannot guarantee your future success but never face the future without planning. The process of planning has great value even when it results in plans never fully implemented. In the absence of planning, managers are reactive rather than pro active. They are responding to events rather than anticipating them. Having a plan to deal with a key employee's resignation is preferable to dealing with a crisis caused by a resignation.

Planning includes SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. Managers need to know their internal strengths and weaknesses and the external opportunities and threats to the business. Writing a mission statement helps answer the question, why are we in business? Once managers agree on their mission, they can proceed to identify the specific goals that will lead to accomplishment of the mission. The final part of planning is determination of strategies and tactics to accomplish the goals. Managers driven by a few carefully selected goals and strategies are more likely to have winning attitudes than those always in search of shortcuts or someone to blame for their shortcomings.

The continuously changing economic, technological, financial, market, legal and competitive environment requires continuous attention to planning. A good plan this year is better than a perfect plan next year. Planning decisions must be made each year. Postponing planning is akin to the sailor leaving port with no map, no destination and no navigation instruments.

Information users - Tradition, memory, experience and standard operating procedures play a role in building a winning tradition. Alone, they are not enough. Managers must use information from within the business and from many outside sources.

Better information for decision making starts at home. A computerized record keeping system that routinely provides summary information about the business is a must for most managers. Only a small number of managers are so brilliant and intuitive that they can succeed without a systematic record keeping and analysis system. Many managers unsuccessfully pretend that they can make good decisions without real information.

Looking across the line fence to observe what the most successful neighbors are doing is a long-standing tradition among farmers. The “looking” now must extend far beyond neighbors. Rich sources of information include members of a business advisory committee, consultants, a network of manager friends across the country, the world-wide-web, the popular press, research reports, technical specialists, and national and international travel.

Opportunity seekers - Seeing opportunities that others miss is key to a winning attitude. Believe that there is a way. “When life gives you a lemon, make lemonade.” As trite as this quote may be, it helps understand managers with winning attitudes. Opportunity seekers made possible a national conference devoted solely to the business of raising and marketing profitable dairy calves and heifers. The traditionalists surely sang loudly and in unison, “There’s no future in growing heifers.” Some missed an opportunity others saw.

Opportunity seekers are creative, imaginative and willing to be wrong. They are comfortable being in the minority. They seek niches to exploit. They value flexibility. Change provides opportunity, so managers with winning attitudes welcome it.

Managers need to seek their own opportunities. They should not expect others to find opportunities for them. One person’s opportunity is another person’s failure. The professional heifer grower sees opportunity. The milk producer sees the heifer grower as a solution to a heifer problem. Each is an opportunity seeker. Both can benefit.

Risk takers - Farming was, is and always will be risky. No manager can know the future with certainty. Some decisions will fail to have the desired outcome. Managers can reduce the uncertainty of their decisions through more and better information. They accept that some things, e.g., future weather, prices and calamities, are unknowable. It isn’t taking many risks or large risks that makes managers successful. It is how they take the risks and how they use the risk management tools available to them. Managers with winning attitudes make brave decisions based on careful analysis and available information not stupid decisions based on hunches and wild guesses about the future.

Two managers can react quite differently to the same opportunity. One sees too much risk, but the other sees an acceptable amount of risk. Both managers understand that the opportunity for increased payoffs is almost always accompanied by increased risk. One is willing to assume the increased risk. The other is not. How many dairy farmers in this country have talked about the opportunity that exists to produce heifers? How small is the percentage who were willing to take the risk of making the changes necessary to become professional heifer growers?

People helpers - Professional heifer growers deal with people as customers and employees. A winning attitude about people results in both customers and employees being considered critical to business success.

Managers help their customers. They realize that customers are individuals wanting and deserving individual attention. Understanding what the customer expects in service, quality, price and timeliness is essential. Succeeding in cooperation with customers provides many long-run opportunities. Succeeding at the expense of customers provides only short-run gains.

Managers also help their employees. “Our strength is the quality of our people.” “People are our most important asset.” Managers with winning attitudes often make these and similar statements. More important, on a day-to-day basis, they make certain employees know the statements are more than words. They reflect a commitment to helping employees advance their careers and lives.

Organization builders - Every manager wrestles with the problem of how to organize the work, people, facilities and equipment in the operation. Failure to build an effective organization results in confusion, inefficiency and frustration for customers, employees and management.

Managers organize businesses. It does not happen automatically. Accepting the responsibility to build an organization attuned to a business mission and goals is the first step. Managers can use organizational principles to deal with issues common to all businesses: work specialization, chain of command, authority, responsibility, delegation, centralization versus decentralization and communication.

Enthusiastic learners - No business manager in 1998 knows enough to manage a 2003 business. Having an excellent 1998 business in the year 2003 means a manager was so busy solving current problems that too little time was devoted to getting ready for future problems. The best managers want to learn more, understand more and apply more of what they are learning. The tyranny of the urgent often consumes mediocre managers. They fall prey to bloated egos and know-it-all attitudes. They regularly blame others for the changes they face rather than learning how to deal with the changes.

A manager’s need to learn never ends. Learning should be fun, challenging, satisfying and confidence building. Managers are most enthusiastic about learning when it fits their preferred learning style. Some managers prefer to learn by reading, studying and thinking on their own. Others prefer to learn by doing. These managers like highly interactive workshops with lots of opportunity to practice as they learn. Still other managers prefer to listen and then question to develop their new understanding. Some managers are quite comfortable with a combination of learning styles. No style is best. The challenge for each learner is to understand his or her preferred style and then arrange learning opportunities consistent with the preferred style.

Summary

What are the key take-home ideas? First, use the seven characteristics as a check list for self-evaluation. Managers wanting to improve attitudes in their businesses need to start with themselves. Those disappointed in their own pessimism and doubts can start improving by focusing on the causes of the attitude problems.

Second, remember that no two managers are alike. The seven items on the check list provide a framework for helping develop a plan for self-improvement. The list cannot serve as a magical recipe for improvement to be blindly applied.

Finally, commit to continuous attention to building a winning attitude. No manager ever finishes with the challenge. On the other hand, the benefits from a winning attitude never end.