Blood, Sweat and Tears (of Joy): Lessons from an Unlikely Entrepreneur - 17499

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ABSTRACT

I never wanted to work for myself. My dream, believe it or not, was to be an anonymous worker hiding amongst thousands in a large company. I had heard that working for yourself means having the most demanding boss imaginable, and I fully expected that to be true. So, back in the early days of my marriage, when my husband said he wanted to start a business and work for himself, I said that was fine … when it got big enough that I could get lost in it, I would come work for him. Flash forward three decades and here I am, running an environmental consulting company. Surely there must be some lessons learned over this time….

1. *You don't know your own strength.* Not only have I seen this in others, I got gob-smacked by it myself. Who knew that I had leadership potential? I certainly didn't! Isn't it nice that someone else saw it in me and patiently waited for me to realize it? Many of our staff have strengths that are different from their perceptions of themselves. How do we play to those strengths? What is the right balance between letting staff do what they want to do and doing what they do best?

2. *Don't box me in!* We're lucky enough to have a boatload of brilliant, creative employees. If we create too many rules and too much structure, they won't have room to express that creativity and we'll lose out on some potentially great ideas. If we have too much freedom, nothing practical will get accomplished. There's that balance word again—what is the right balance between freedom for creative expression and guidelines for productive work?

3. *Change—love it or hate it, it's going to happen.* Apparently everyone isn't exactly like me (thank heavens!). I love change. I'm addicted to it. I can't imagine thinking that next year is going to be just like this year. Funny thing I've learned along the way … most people don't feel that way. Knowledge management, succession planning, corporate growth … all of these are processes that cause stress to those who don't share my love of change. Change management is really a public relations challenge. Since change is inevitable, and most people aren't very comfortable with change, it has to be managed as a positive process.

This paper will surely resonate with all managers on our shared challenges, and it might even provide answers for some workplace management problems. These solutions aren't the "right" way to do things … they are just solutions that have worked (and some that have not) as we've built the company all of our employees want to work in.

INTRODUCTION

Holding a management position at a company like Neptune is unique. Many of the people we are managing do not need direct help in solving problems, but rather a set of guidelines to work within [1]. As our company has grown, we have often looked to where we started and remembered how, at the beginning, things were very close and personal and the connections between colleagues, clients, and management were friendly and caring. Neptune has always held those values close during the company's growth so that those who work there are comfortable talking to their superiors.

DISCUSSION

One of the challenges of managing at Neptune is working with people who often know more about their specific fields than you do, even though you are managing them. Managing should not be about enforcing strict rules and placing restrictions on those below you. Doing this will only dull the imagination of employees and ultimately stop them from thinking of creative solutions for problems. At Neptune we are lucky to have some employees who seem to be good at everything we throw at them. It is invaluable to have this type of employee around to help the company. Other people are very specialized and extremely competent in their fields, but don't particularly excel at taking on new projects in different areas of work. This isn't to say that one type of employee is more valuable than another, but rather that a balance is needed between the two. Having a mixture of those who are very focused in one area and those who are able to branch out and take on new projects helps to create a learning environment where those taking on new projects will eventually be able to teach others about what they are doing. This process also helps to create new management possibilities for employees to move up the corporate ladder.

Of the many things a leader must do, one of the most important is getting people not just to do their work but also to excel at it. This task can be difficult because employees often think that their strengths lie in one area, while you as their manager are able to see that their strongest field where their best work comes out is in a different area. There is not one correct way to motivate employees to excel. Rather, every employee needs a personalized approach so that they can achieve to their best level. This makes management a difficult task. How many companies out there have a cookie cutter management approach which leaves their employees constantly complaining about not getting the attention they feel they need, either in training or in general support? At Neptune our approach is to always be available as managers, not to hold our employees' hands as they do their work but rather to offer advice and guidance when needed and always to encourage new ideas for how to accomplish different tasks.

Neptune is constantly trying to find ways to move its employees into management positions to help further the quality of work achieved by the company. Preparing employees for the move into management is not easy. It takes time to prepare properly and do all that can be done to ensure success once there. The generic

example of a pyramid structure is still one of the best ways to approach management. If you have an employee who has consistently shown that they excel in their field and know the work inside and out, what is the best approach to moving them into management? Is it better to give them a team of employees to help them and simply wish them luck in completing the work they need to do, or is it perhaps better to guide them into management by having them shadow on an existing project and learn from other managers before taking on a team of their own? While the answer may seem obvious, some people truly do better in the sink or swim situation. When you are in the position of President of a company you need to always be watching people to figure out how they will best take to new situations. Does one employee need to be shown everything multiple times before they are competent, and does another just need to be pointed in the right direction and then let loose? Everyone is different and it falls to those in charge to get the best out of everyone and guide them forward. Either way, when you place a new manager, whether you at first stand by their side and manage with them or whether you take a back seat and simply observe what they are doing, it is important for a new manager to have someone there to at least reassure that things are going smoothly and that the project is heading in the right direction.

One of the ways to get the best out of employees is to allow them to try the things they want to do, and then to also have them complete tasks they are not as eager to do, but to which they are better suited. This is the type of thing that makes a good manager: having the ability to successfully steer employees towards that which they are best suited. An easy example of this is having an employee who thinks of themselves as very imaginative and creative. However, as their manager you constantly notice how they are always instinctively paying attention to detail. Lots of people like to be creative and find ways to express themselves, both in their personal lives and at the workplace. They might sign emails a little differently, or use a different font in them, or have different choices of organization to create a happier work environment for themselves. An important skill as a manager in a situation where an employee wants to be creative but you might need them to be more detail oriented is to find a way to still let them be creative while also focusing on details. If you repress their creativity, then in the future they will be less likely to use their unique creativity to solve a problem, and will simply be stumped by it. A way to solve this whole dilemma is to provide the employee with a new task in which they can take many creative liberties, and have them work on the original task with the detail orientation that is needed.

One of the more challenging situations that can face modern workplaces, especially smaller ones whose success or failure is measured on smaller margins, is having employees who want to do everything themselves because they are worried about the capability of others. This situation can basically be called micromanaging, but it does have some differences. The most important difference is that micromanaging requires lower-level employees who are being told exactly what to do and how to do it. What we are talking about is having management-level employees who are doing work that they don't need to be doing. This can be for any number of acceptable reasons, but the one to watch out for is if they are doing this work themselves because they are worried that others will not do it well enough. This can

be a big problem for companies because it will slowly start to undermine the confidence of employees. If you have a manager who is never giving work to other people and is consistently having too much on their own plate because they only trust the quality of their own work, then slowly but surely the confidence of employees will go down as they are always left wondering "why am I never given these projects to work on?" This type of mentality and lack of confidence will then slowly seep into other areas of their work. At any company it is the job of the entire management team to make sure this doesn't happen. Every employee has strong attributes and weaker ones. This goes for management as well, so the important thing to do is to recognize when someone is working in an area that isn't utilizing all of their best attributes. This happens more often with management level positions because, at lower levels, things are just assigned to you and you do them to the best of your ability. However, as a manager part of your job is choosing what to work on, and if you constantly pick things that others can do then you are not helping the company run as efficiently as possible. It is a difficult task because everyone wants the company to do as well as possible, so this area of productivity needs to be carefully navigated. One possible solution to this problem of having managers work on projects that others could do is simply to have a conversation with them and point out that there are other employees at the company who can work on certain projects, and also to point out that the manager's skills would be perfect for other projects as well. This solution helps everyone by allowing a manager to pass work to those under them, thus improving morale by conveying a message of confidence in employees, while also giving the manager the time necessary to work on what suits them best.

There is a double-edged sword that affects the productivity of companies and offices. Allowing employees to have free creative license on projects and in the workplace can either turn out extremely well or can cause problems that are difficult to resolve. In an ideal world, everyone would be free to express themselves however they see fit and to create the most productive work area for themselves. However, this is not an ideal world and compromises must be made to keep productivity high while still making sure all employees are comfortable with working conditions and standards. First and foremost, the workplace needs to be well equipped for accomplishing the work required by the company. Simply put, this means that all of the necessary things to accomplish work must be made available. After all of the necessities are in place, then companies can begin to branch out further and create a work environment that helps to encourage free thinking. How different companies want to encourage free thinking is up to them, but an example at Neptune is the ping pong table that has its own room off the office kitchen. There are multiple benefits to having a ping pong table there. The most obvious is that, if anyone wants to, they can go play a couple of games and reinvigorate themselves through a little exercise. However, there is another even sneakier way in which having a ping pong table helps the productivity of the office. Just having it in the office, whether or not people are using it, seems to help because it adds fun to the idea of the office. It's very similar to those few beers you keep in the fridge; you aren't necessarily planning on drinking them, but knowing they are there if you want one is enough to keep you happy. The same thing happens in an office if you have something fun around. At Neptune that fun thing is the ping pong table, which

by just offering the potential to play improves the morale around the office. Another example is having windows around to allow natural light into office spaces. These ideas might seem obvious but that doesn't mean they aren't important. Even those employees who love their jobs also have things outside the office that they look forward to doing. Having windows around to see outside provides a constant reminder of what they can look forward to at the end of a work day or week. Companies should never underestimate the power fun can have on work productivity. However, the other side to this double-edged sword is that being allowed too much freedom of expression could take away from the productivity of employees. Back to the ping pong table at Neptune, for example. The table is located in a room by itself off of the kitchen, away from the working offices of employees. This is done so that potential noise from playing won't impact others' ability to work on projects. This was a well thought out plan by Neptune's management about how to add fun to the office without distracting from work. At an individual employee's level, a simple example is music. Everyone likes music, but not everyone likes the same music. The easy solution to this is to have employees listen to music with headphones while they are working. Not everything will be as straightforward as "listen to music with headphones." Some things will require more creative problem solving to ensure that the workplace remains productive for all employees.

Creativity can both help and hurt actual work done by employees. Creative thinking has undoubtedly led to some of the most amazing discoveries and ideas of all time. However, there are positive and negative ways to encourage creative thinking. As a manager you are always trying to find ways to get the best out of those working under you, but sometimes you realize that someone has been given too much free reign, which has caused a problem with how they are accomplishing some of their work. Not that the employee has done anything wrong with how they solved the problem, but perhaps they have made it difficult for others to help with that project because the understanding of how it works is not obvious to anyone but the employee who thought of the idea. This is much like those days back in school when your teachers said you must show your work. The biggest problem with creative solutions is that they are only initially understood by the person who thought of them in the first place. The advantage to "showing your work" is that others can then learn from your creative problem solving. Now in school this was much easier: 2 + 2 = 4, right? Well perhaps that's too simple of an example, but it still makes the point. Simple arithmetic is easily shown in a step-by-step process, but, at Neptune, working with vastly complicated statistical models and complex theories, an employee could certainly find it difficult to explain how they solved a unique problem. It is in moments like this that a fine line must be walked between allowing creative problem solving while also staying close enough to known solutions that others will be able to learn from new solutions.

Change is something that happens in the world; it affects everything and everyone. Yet there are some ways in which people and companies can prepare for change. At the top of this list is communication. At Neptune, communication comes in many different shapes and forms, from face-to-face talking to emails, town hall meetings, and newsletters. Just by having many open lines of communication through all

levels of the company, change is much easier to be prepared for. Without communication, change is very difficult to process and adapt to. Sticking with the theme of simple examples, what if somebody doesn't show up to the office one day, choosing instead to work from home, but doesn't communicate this plan with anyone? Many people must then suddenly change their work plans for the day and might possibly need to organize new conference calls or cancel meetings. If the person who chooses to stay home for the day instead communicates with the office what their plan is, then everyone else has a much easier time adapting to what is happening. That is a small example of how communication makes change a little easier. Communicating throughout the company about all things enables everyone to be much closer to constantly being on the same page about what is happening. To avoid panic, Neptune communicates about everything: day-to-day occurrences at the office, health care changes, office building updates, holidays, company events, even the potential direction the company is going in. The idea is that the more employees know and talk about, the better equipped they will be to handle changes as they come. Health care changes make for an excellent example. Imagine that Neptune decided to change coverage plans without ever saying anything to anyone. The chaos that would follow such a change would be damaging to the productivity of the company. Instead, if we keep employees in the loop about what the company is thinking, then when changes do happen nobody is taken by surprise and people move forward calmly instead of panicking. Communication is an essential tool for running a company.

CONCLUSIONS

Neptune is a company that is constantly in the process of evolution, and it is the responsibility of those on the management team to help the company evolve productively. Evolution goes hand in hand with change, but, if handled properly, evolution is much more of a voluntary change. By doing anything Neptune as a company will inevitably evolve and change. The difficult thing about evolving is that employees get comfortable with what they are doing and evolution brings about new and sometimes stressful situations that can be difficult to cope with. Managers must be able to see evolution coming and to prepare the company for it. This is a difficult task because it often seems like trying to predict the future. The evolution of a company will often follow project trends and available work. At Neptune, for example, if risk analysis work suddenly becomes in high demand, then the company would need to think about the future and decide whether more resources need to be put into risk analysis work or whether it is just a small phase of an abundance of work. This type of decision falls to the management team and requires thinking about what type of evolutionary path the company wants to follow. Questions that would need to be answered are along the lines of: would this change ultimately be profitable to the company, does the company have the capability to handle this new work or would expansion be needed, and, if expansion is needed, would it upset the previously existing balance of the company? Finally, the biggest question is and always will be, does taking on this new work or getting rid of old work continue to promote the ideals on which the company was founded? None of these questions are easily answered, and they are certainly not answered without at least some degree of doubt, but ultimately the goal of any company and

the managers within it is to progress to the next level, whatever that might be. There is no right or wrong way to manage and run a company and every company is different. However, all companies are striving to be as good as they can be. It falls to those working within each company to excel and push their company's work forward to new frontiers and exciting opportunities.

REFERENCES

1. Clemen R. and T. Reilly, 2001, *Making Hard Decisions,* Duxbury Press, Pacific Grove, CA. (This is just a place holder reference to remind me of the proper format for any references added in the final draft.)