

UNLEASHING DISCRETIONARY EFFORT

Nurturing The Virtuous Circle

Envision your workplace bustling with energy. All the employees are fully engaged, not just in executing routine tasks, but also by providing *Discretionary Effort* in collaborative problem-solving to enhance the organization's value to its customers. The employees hold themselves personally responsible for their performance and for the successful operation of the business of the organization.

The Manager's Lament

Too often, I hear a common lament from managers that employees basically are *slugs* [their word], that they are just interested in "punching the clock" and that their only goal is to deliver the minimum required output. These managers are frustrated that their admonitions for more results are not being achieved.

I have explored this issue with many managers in order to develop a clearer understanding of their perceptions and insights. When asked to describe their workforce, these managers identified a natural distribution curve wherein 25% are *slugs*, 25% are achievers and the remaining 50% are spread between.

Now, I will agree that there are some people who indeed are *slugs*, but I believe their numbers are a mere fraction of 25% of the workforce. So I then queried: "Do you think these *slugs* were born this way?"

The managers concluded that they were not born as *slugs*, but had become that way over time. There even was an observation that some of them may have been good performers in the past.

"So what happened to change them?" I posed.

The conversation that ensued was intriguing.

- ◆ Perhaps they had had a bad experience.
- ◆ Maybe they had a manager who was a bully.
- ◆ It could be that they had suggestions that weren't seriously considered.
- ◆ Their contribution might not have been acknowledged.
- ◆ They might be fatigued.
- ◆ The work wasn't arranged effectively.
- ◆ The environment was driving them crazy.
- ◆ They got bored and frustrated.
- ◆ They didn't feel connected.



- ◆ They lacked a sense of purpose.
- ◆ They didn't see the value of caring.
- ◆ There was no team dynamic.

The Manager's Limitations

So, here's a manager who views 25% of the workforce as *slugs*, the causes of which may be of indeterminate nature and, perhaps, aren't terribly relevant, anyways. The fact is the manager believes certain things and, therefore, will behave in certain ways. The manager can entertain a number of options, but will encounter serious limitations.

For instance, the manager can opt to do nothing, basically giving up on a quarter of the staff. Although one might understand these sentiments, the corrosive impact on the rest of the workforce needs to be considered. Thus, this approach is not a viable option.

The manager can fire all the *slugs*, but this comes at a cost which likely will be too big to bear. Furthermore, recruiting and training the replacement workers would be onerous, while still maintaining business continuity. Finally, the manager would be drawing from the same gene pool and, therefore, is likely to inadvertently recruit some different *slugs*.

The manager can try ordering staff to behave or perform in a particular way. But, this just won't work either, because ultimately an individual's behaviour and performance is their choice. Yelling, cajoling, berating, pleading – for all these approaches, although there might be some short-term change, nothing will be successful in a sustainable way.

What's a manager to do, then?

Change Your Perspective

Here's the paradox. If you want to change the behaviour and performance of your employees, **you** will have to change first. This is obvious, if you think about it, because what you currently are doing is not yielding the results you desire.

You need to make a *leap of faith* and start believing that the workforce is not populated with *slugs*. Instead, start viewing these folks as frustrated humans who are behaving a certain way as a reaction against a constrained environment. They have much greater potential, if you can re-construct the situation to better match their motivational needs. The objective is to align the needs of the individuals with the needs of the organization.

And to understand their needs, you must get to know them. This requires conversation.

Have Long Conversations

You need to embark on long one-on-one conversations with each of your employees in order to explore their wants and needs. But in the fast-paced business environment, time is precious. How does a manager find extra time to talk with the staff? If this becomes your priority, something else will have to shift. That's the first dilemma.



The next barrier will be their reaction. As you begin these conversations, you likely will encounter a range of reactions, including scepticism, resistance, hesitation, and maybe even hostility. They have become accustomed to a predictable type of behaviour from you, so it is natural that they will have some reservations, as you change your style. Stick with it, you're being evaluated.

Be Authentic

You can't fake sincerity or caring. Just paying lip service will doom the conversations. You need to take an honest interest in each employee and reflect that authenticity in the attention you dedicate to them.

Once the staff perceive that you are genuinely interested in them, their needs and their development, they will start to become more engaged and forthcoming. People will respond in different ways and at different speeds, so you need to be sensitive to this and demonstrate adaptability.

Influence The Environment

As a leader, your greatest influence is articulating a vision and then encouraging and supporting people to engage and contribute to it. You set the tone and context for evolving the culture, the physical environment, the way business is organized and conducted, and the spirit of team accomplishments. All of this takes time and effort.

Avoid grand announcements. We're all too experienced and a bit jaded to be swayed by speaking notes, presentations and staged assemblies. Be real. Excite people with your enthusiasm for the vision, but let them affect its evolution. They will have many practical ideas that you probably haven't considered.

Provide Support And Encouragement

I believe that your single biggest goal is to turn all your employees into stars. Keep this clearly stated as your mantra. You are developing staff who are capable, competent, professional, and proficient, and who welcome stretch goals.

Through the conversations with each of the employees, jointly identify the types of support required and a plan of action. Provide ongoing and consistent encouragement. Not only are you solidifying the relationships, you are strengthening your organization's competitive advantage. This becomes an investment in the future.

Recognize Achievements

Take a descriptive snapshot of the operating environment and the behaviours of the staff at the outset. Then track changes and progress over time. Often, a wall visual will help people recognize their collective accomplishments and growth.

Celebrate success. But, also celebrate someone who tried something new, even if it didn't succeed. They had the bravery to take a chance and action is what you want.



People need to be assured that they won't be penalized, if an innovation doesn't work out. Celebrations tend to become very infective and, therefore, are a powerful tool for encouraging others. This is how we overcome inertia and gain momentum.

The Virtuous Circle

By its very definition *Discretionary Effort* cannot be imposed or mandated. It is solely exercised by the individual. The leader's role is to facilitate the circumstances and interventions that will support and encourage employees to want to give more effort.

You don't have to be frustrated by inadequate performance or despair that things can't be changed and improved. Those who seemed to be *slugs* can be renewed, with surprising enthusiasm. Incredible things will flow from that.

So start envisioning your workforce as committed people who are dedicated to doing a superior job every day. *The Virtuous Circle* starts with you.

- ◆ Change your perspective
- ◆ Set the expectations
- ◆ Have long, authentic conversations
- ◆ Find out what the staff really want and need
- ◆ Support and encourage their development
- ◆ Celebrate their contributions and achievements

Unleashing Discretionary Effort

You can create a workplace that is bustling with energy. All the employees are fully engaged, not just in executing routine tasks, but also by providing *Discretionary Effort* in collaborative problem-solving to enhance the organization's value to its customers. The employees hold themselves personally responsible for their performance and for the successful operation of the business of the organization.

Unleashing *Discretionary Effort* takes time and energy. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

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