



NOVEMBER 13, 2006

IDEAS -- THE WELCH WAY

Send The Jerks Packing

Employees who make the numbers but undermine trust and morale must go--publicly

How do you weed out the bad apples in an organization? -- David Michalek, Bartlett, III.

Start by putting down the pruning shears and picking up a buzz saw.

Look, nothing hurts a company more than when the bosses ignore, indulge, or otherwise tolerate a jerk--or two or three--in the house. Such latitude undermines organizational trust and morale, and without those, the competitive linchpins of collaboration and speed are just plain harder. Not to mention the fact that jerks take the fun out of work.

But before we talk about how to get rid of jerks--or bad apples, as you call them--let's be clear about who these people are. In business you can divide employees into four categories by looking at them along two dimensions: how well they perform--that is, how often they make the numbers--and how well they demonstrate company values. Now, "values" is a lofty and somewhat vague word, but all it really means is "behaviors." Values are how companies want their employees to act, which is why most lists include virtues like integrity and fairness. Those are necessary, but any list of values can, and should, also be linked to strategic goals. A company could, for instance, add values that say: We think and act globally, celebrate teamwork, show a strong bias for speed, or approach problems with urgency.

Back to the four types of employees. The first are people with good performance and good values. With these winners, management's job is easy--nurture, reward, and push onward and upward. The second are employees who have neither good results nor good behaviors. Again, the job is easy: Show them the door. A third kind of employee may deliver weak results for a year but still exhibit all the behaviors you want, so managers should give these well-intentioned people a second or third chance. Type 3 employees may have a particular performance issue, but they're not jerks.

Then there's a fourth kind of employee, the one who delivers the numbers but doesn't live the values. You know the type--who doesn't? They exist at every level in almost every organization. These high performers can be mean, secretive, or arrogant. Very often they kiss up and kick down. Some are stone-cold loners, while others are moody, keeping those around them in a kind of terrorized thrall.

And yet, too often Type 4s remain unscathed. Sure, their bosses might rebuke them, but things usually don't change after that. There's been no sting. Indeed, most of us have probably been guilty somewhere along the way of letting the burning desire for good results cover up the sins of an employee's poisonous behavior. We've squirmed and looked away.

You can't do that!

If you have a jerk problem, you have to stare it in the face. And that process can only start with a transformative eureka. Company leaders must come to believe that jerks hurt the organization more than they help. While their results are great, their collateral damage to the culture and overall competitiveness is far greater.

ONCE THE LEADERSHIP BUYS INTO that line of reasoning--and really feels it in their bones--getting rid of jerks is pretty straightforward. Managers have to make sure everyone in the company knows the values; they have to demonstrate them themselves, lavishly praise and reward them in others, and basically talk about the values *ad nauseam*. In fact, the values have to be so blindingly apparent to people in the organization that if someone doesn't live them, the interloper would be spotted immediately, like a player in a Yankees uniform showing up in the Red Sox dugout.

But the real clincher in ridding an organization of jerks is removing the ones you have and doing so with public fanfare. It's just

wrong to can a person for a values violation and then soft-pedal the event with the line: "Joe left to spend more time with his family." Leaders need to say: "Joe had to go because he did not think globally," or if diversity is a value, "Joe was asked to leave because he was not gender and race blind in hiring." Every time you get rid of a jerk, don't miss the opportunity to make it a teaching moment. Pretty soon people will learn that jerk behavior has a steep price indeed.

No organization will ever weed out all its jerks. Some will slip by because their performance is so terribly good or their bad behaviors are so frighteningly subtle.

But you can never stop trying to weed out bad apples. They're just rotten for business.

Jack and Suzy Welch look forward to answering your questions about business, company, or career challenges. Please e-mail them at thewelchway@BusinessWeek.com For their podcast discussion of this column, go to www.businessweek.com/search/podcasting.htm

By Jack and Suzy Welch

Xerox **Color**. It makes business sense.

The McGraw-Hill Companies