

all involved are making decisions that support the defined goals and that leadership is in agreement.

“For example, there may be a great idea for boosting an organization’s brand image,” says Puopolo. “And that’s certainly important these days. This idea may not lead to measurable revenue increases right away. But if that’s what leadership is expecting, they will deem the idea a failure.”

Hurdles, Not Roadblocks

What gets in the way of innovation? Nearly every organization, no matter the industry, points to lack of communication as the greatest enemy. “We spend lots of time communicating throughout the business—telling our executives what we’re pursuing and why,” says Puopolo. “We generate newsletters and give briefings at leadership meetings. There’s no real benefit to stealthy innovation.”

“In such a dynamic industry, it can be challenging to deal with all equal shareholders,” says Hendrick. “In our case, that’s the 120-some doctors who are the owners and leaders. They are also our revenue-generating employees. We have to keep them up to speed on what’s going on and why we’re considering any change.”

Hendrick also warns of another pitfall: complacency. “You can’t just see a problem in a heat map, fix it, and then relax,” he says. “You have to raise the bar each time.”

Both Hendrick and Puopolo agree that the best way to avoid obstacles and succeed with innovation is

through people. “Innovation success starts and ends with identifying, hiring, and retaining the right staff,” says Hendrick. “For us, that means people with a strong service mentality.”

“You need people who understand working in ambiguity and tackling the challenges at hand,” adds Puopolo. “You need people with initiative who aren’t worried about roadblocks.”

The Bottom Line

Innovation is imperative for health care organizations aiming to not only survive, but also thrive amid unprecedented industry changes. The good news: Every organization has the capacity to innovate.

You don’t have to be a venture capitalist-backed company with a good idea to be innovative or to implement new ideas. With the right people, the right support, a few tools, and a clear vision, health care organizations of all sizes across the spectrum can position themselves to grow through innovation. ■

Reader’s Resource

Cathy Halliwell is a business management and systems implementation expert with ICF Ironworks. ICF Ironworks combines strategy, technology, and design services to assist clients in developing large-scale, complex technology projects. For more information, go to digital.icfi.com.

The Value of Valuing Employees

Six ways leaders inadvertently curb innovation, motivation

Few leaders set out to make their employees feel like they don’t matter. But even the most well-meaning leaders may be doing it accidentally—and the repercussions can be severe.

Of course, employees matter. If they didn’t, you wouldn’t hire them, trust them to do important work, or keep paying them week after week.

And if you think about it at all (which you probably don’t), you assume they realize that. It’s only logical. But according to Christine Comaford, leaders may inadvertently do and say things that make employees

feel as if they don’t matter. Employee responses to leaders’ actions or words may have little to do with logic, but it matters whether employees feel they matter.

Mattering Matters

Comaford explains why mattering matters. Simply, it is “one of the three most primal human needs, along with safety and belonging,” she says.

“When employees are made to feel that they don’t matter, it happens on an emotional level, not an intellectual one. And we now know that emotions, not intellect, drive 90 percent of human behavior,”

explains Comaford, author of *Smart Tribes: How Teams Become Brilliant Together*.

And when employees feel they don't matter, the organization suffers. The reason, Comaford explains, is because employees who feel they don't matter "simply cannot function at their highest level of performance."

When leaders say or do something that makes employees feel insignificant (and/or frightened or isolated; the three tend to work together), they revert to the fight/flight/freeze part of the brain—or what Comaford calls the "Critter State." Once in this state, all innovation and collaboration skills fall by the wayside and every decision boils down to a single question: *What will keep me safe right now?*

Valuing Employees

To consistently and genuinely demonstrate to employees that they matter, Comaford outlines common ways leaders communicate just the opposite. She also offers ways to avert the common leadership pitfalls that can give employees the sense that leadership just doesn't care about them.

In consistently demonstrating and communicating to the employees that they matter, leaders can avoid employees falling into the so-called critter state and instead help them move to and stay in what Comaford calls their "Smart State." The smart state, she explains, is where employees have full access to their creativity, problem-solving ability, collaboration, and emotional engagement.

As a leadership trainer and coach, Comaford has worked with leaders in organizations that have realized bottom-line benefits by taking care to show employees they care. The results: Clients report revenues and profits rise by more than 20 percent a year, while one-third to nearly 42 percent of employees take on increased responsibility—without asking for more pay.

Leadership Pitfalls, And How to Avoid Them

Following are the top six leadership pitfalls that can lead to employees feeling they don't matter, along with Comaford's advice to avoid those pitfalls.

Pitfall No. 1: Failing to Respond to Employee Emails

Leaders and manager are busy, and employees know that, but the critter state doesn't spring from the rational part of the brain, Comaford says. So, when employees send an email and don't get a response, instead of thinking, "Oh, the boss will get back to me

when she has a moment," they think, "She doesn't like my idea. She doesn't like me. I feel rejected. I don't matter."

Avoiding this pitfall is simple: Take time to respond to employee emails. "When an employee emails the boss, especially when that email asks for your approval or contains sensitive content, she's putting herself out there," Comaford explains. "Always respond, even if it's just to say, 'I need a little time to think about that but I'll get back to you in a day or two.'"

Pitfall No. 2: Failing to Provide Feedback—Positive or Negative

When people matter to us, we want them to know they've done a good job. If they haven't done a good job, we want them to know that too, so they can improve. To an employee's critter brain, silence means we don't care enough to let them know either way.

Although leaders typically offer formal feedback through performance evaluations, Comaford urges leaders to also focus on providing employees with informal feedback. Further, she advises leaders to provide positive and negative feedback alike.

While a simple, "Good job," means a lot, employees also will value feedback on areas in which they can improve. The reason, Comaford explains, is that the employee then has direction and a focus and "when your employee starts getting better results, he'll know you cared enough to speak up."

"It feels un-PC to make this comparison, but consider how well children respond to being consistently held accountable," she adds. "Rules and boundaries make people feel loved. It's true for employees and leaders, too. In the critter brain, we're all two-year-olds."

Pitfall No. 3: Acknowledging People Only When They Make Mistakes

While employees will value leaders who make the time to tell them what they are doing well and where they can improve, those who only receive negative feedback can make them feel like a faulty cog who doesn't matter to the organization.

To let employees know they matter, Comaford urges leaders to make a positive personal connection with employees as often as possible. Be specific about what you like and let employees know their unique contribution makes a real difference to the organization.

"Better yet, make a point of praising them publicly," Comaford notes. "Social rewards are extremely

powerful—far more powerful than cash rewards, in fact.”

Pitfall No. 4: Failing to Celebrate Victories

Getting paid is not reward enough for a doing a great job. Indeed, a paycheck can seem like oil for the cog—necessary, but not meaningful. Celebrating a great job, on the other hand, brings people together and builds teams. Comaford notes the celebrations may be simple, but they are not insignificant.

“Team victory celebrations foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie,” Comaford explains, which go hand in hand with demonstrating to employees that they matter.

Pitfall No. 5: Showing Favoritism

Inadvertent or otherwise, in many organizations, there are certain team members who are perceived as “above the law” or in the “in crowd.” These employees tend not to be held accountable for any lack of performance, and yet they often get the lion’s share of raises, promotions, or perks, even if they don’t deserve them. Other employees notice.

“People think lovability isn’t an issue in business, but I’m here to tell you it is,” Comaford says. “Feeling that others are more ‘loved’ triggers safety, belonging, and mattering issues in those on the outside.”

To avoid this pitfall, avoid favoring employees to the greatest extent possible. “Absolute equality may not be possible in an imperfect world,” Comaford notes, “but it’s critical to aim for it.”

Pitfall No. 6: Burning Out Employees

Do your employees slog away like slaves, working long hours and completing one high-stress task after another, day after day after day? Not only will they feel that you don’t care about their well-being, they’ll burn out.

From time to time, all employees in any organization have to exert extra effort. No one, however, can sustain such a pace forever. Yet, this dynamic often persists, particularly when leaders “self-sacrifice,” Comaford says. Then, even when leaders tell employees they don’t have to work late every day, they see leaders doing it and feel the same is expected of them. No one benefits, however, creating a lose-lose situation.

“Sustainability is about creating win-win agreements with ourselves and others,” Comaford says. “We all need a good blend of people, activities, and things that excite and energize us in order to balance out those (inevitable) things that drain us. If your employees matter to you, you’ll help them strike that balance.”

Summary

For many leaders, paying so much attention to what goes on inside employees’ heads is a foreign notion. When Comaford’s clients see the astonishing results outlined earlier in this article, however, they are more than willing to change the way they lead.

“When we’re able to break the mental patterns that hold us—and those around us—back, we can reach heights of performance we never thought possible,” according to Comaford. “And the best part is, it’s more rewarding for everyone. It can take work from being drudgery to being fun and exciting and meaningful.” ■

Reader’s Resource

Christine Comaford, an expert in human behavior and applied neuroscience, is a global thought leader who helps organizations navigate growth and change with exceptional result. Her new book, *Smart Tribes: How Teams Become Brilliant Together*, is on the *New York Times*’ bestsellers list. For more information, go to christinecomaford.com.

Choosing the Right Strategy ...

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Approaches to Patient Estimation

Enhanced pricing transparency can improve the financial performance of hospitals and health systems by giving revenue cycle staff the tools with which to prepare accurate estimates and the confidence to request payment from patients at the point of service. It also can lead to improved satisfaction for patients and staff.

A June 2011 survey of health care finance professionals at ANI: The HFMA National Institute found that point-of-service collections—and, consequently, a hospital’s bottom line—are greatly compromised by a lack of preparedness and awareness on both sides of the payment equation.

Seven out of 10 health care finance professionals who were surveyed reported that their hospitals or health systems collect less than 30 percent of patient balances up front. According to survey respondents, the biggest challenges for collecting payments at

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