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“That’s not my job”

As the famous story goes, while touring NASA’s facility in 1961, President John F. Kennedy asked a janitor what he did at NASA. The janitor proudly answered: “Sir, I’m helping to put a man on the moon!”

The above story, amazing as it sounds, has many versions, and we don’t know if it’s true or not, but, as Mark Twain once said “Never let the facts get in the way of a good story.”

Getting back to the janitor, and his relevance to our newsletter, we would like to highlight four aspects of the story above: a) The janitor was not an *ordinary* employee; b) Someone did a fantastic job of selling the moon landing vision to the whole team, c) employees at the bottom of the pyramid, doing menial tasks, normally don’t see the connection between their job and the mission, and d) the janitor was not intimidated by the president.

a) Ordinary employees produce ordinary results

People doing menial jobs, normally at the bottom of the corporate and social pyramids, are paid minimum wage most of the time. Corporations see these jobs as unsophisticated, bureaucratic, back office types of jobs. They therefore don’t demand exceptional competencies such as having critical thinking skills, problem solving abilities, accountability and strategic thinking skills, as well as being proactive, to name a few. Before some of you say “Come on, all those competencies for minimum wage?” think of the janitor. What made him exceptional was not the job he was doing, or how much money he was making. It was the set of competencies he possessed. If you hire people that are good at doing mechanical work only, don’t expect anything other than ordinary results. Back office

employees that say “I don’t have clients” can’t see beyond the bureaucratic task they have been told to perform.

Some airlines call their passengers their guests, but more than a marketing strategy what really makes a difference is how employees treat their customers. We find it amazing that most airline employees don’t have a clear understanding that their clients are the ones who keep them alive—not the unions and not management. Many airline employees treat passengers as an annoyance.

b) The vision needs to be over communicated

Employees performing bureaucratic tasks in the back office, most of the time, have never seen a real client. It is up to managers and supervisors to translate the client’s needs to their staff and to explain how their tasks are connected to the outcome of the company. Every employee should be able see how they contribute to the bottom line.

Experts suggest that the vision is undersold by a factor of 10. Don’t think that an email or a website will do the trick. Talk to your employees, take advantage of every opportunity to sell the vision, especially when things are changing (which is always).

c) Connect tasks to the outcome

If an I.T. employee focuses solely on programming software and adding system features without figuring out how the system will be used and by who, the client’s requirements will not be met. He must use curiosity, critical thinking and strategy to figure out these questions.

Unfortunately many employees cannot describe their job unless they list all the tasks



they perform. Bosses need to help their employees to “connect the dots,” clarifying the outcome, mission, reasons, purpose, etc.

d) Create a climate where innovation flourishes

In “Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer: Managing for Conflict and Consensus,” Harvard Business School's Michael Roberto alerts us to the dangers of becoming a culture of conformity wherein the leader is never questioned. Ironically, one of the examples mentioned is JFK's unquestioned decision to invade the Bay of Pigs, and its consequences during the Cuban Missile crises. Every leader is responsible for creating a climate where employees, regardless of rank, background or thinking style feel free to contribute and disagree with decisions being made. This is especially true when leadership decisions impact key stakeholders, such as shareholders, regulators and customers.

Finally, one would think that when economic times are tough, employees would not say the dreaded phrase (*It's not my job*). Well.....please take a few minutes to read an article exactly about this.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/08/24/living/not-my-job-cb>

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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