



Fact Finder

HRA Services, Inc.

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“ . . . helping organizations find solutions to people-related problems”

TALENT IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

A recent client conversation went something like this: “You give us a lot of good ideas and advice. Why does it seem to take us so long to get results? And sometimes we don’t seem to execute at all.” Many organizations face this problem. It’s one of the basic laws of organizational physics: “A body at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted on by some external force.” While senior leaders often sense what should be done to address major obstacles to organizational progress and change, they find ways and reasons to delay action: “The timing’s just not right.” “We need to wait until business is stronger.” “If I make this change now, it is likely to create problems among other managers.” “I don’t think the company is ready for this much change right now.” “I know he’s hurting the overall team effort, and we should make a change, but sometimes his brilliance is just astounding.” “We’ve been successful for a long time—maybe it’s best to just stay the course.” “If we act now, we could cause even more problems.”

There’s an old adage that loosely paraphrased says that one mediocre idea implemented is worth more than a hundred brilliant ideas unexecuted. The result of management inaction is a sense of ineffectiveness that ebbs and flows within the organization and can reach levels that create real and lingering organizational discomfort, anxiety, and paranoia.

The net effect for managers and employees is that the organization experiences a sense of drift and individuals feel an agonizing lack of recourse—that is, the inability to get things done, make decisions, and make progress in a clear direction. If this process continues over time, trust erodes and individuals feel that the organization lacks the ability to guide and control its own destiny. While senior managers can view delaying and execution of decisions as prudent and thoughtful, other managers and employees may publicly support this approach as they privately express in veiled terms anxiety about ineffective leadership.

Leadership is about leading. Leading is about execution. Actually, leadership is about many things—things ranging from the obvious to the subtle, things that seem ambiguous, arguable, and even contradictory. As they mature in their roles, leaders must develop an interest in, a tolerance of, and an attraction for dealing with ambiguity. They must continually hone their analytical skills and their intuitive abilities and learn to engage, energize, and focus their people on attacking problems with commitment and creativity. It’s amazing how often talented managers and employees go un-enlisted in the organization’s effort to make progress and become increasingly successful. Instead, they are often under-utilized and under-challenged, leaving them increasingly disenchanted and disengaged in the meaningful work of the enterprise.

A talented individual is a terrible thing to waste. Leaders are in the business of teaching others how to optimize their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. If you're limiting your organization's performance by not actively encouraging managers at all levels to challenge their people to take risks and execute thoughtful change, you may be risking longer-term organizational stagnation and the loss of vital future leaders.

SOFT SKILLS HIT HARD

In working with groups to improve effectiveness, productivity, and profit, we emphasize mounting evidence that soft skills are hard-hitting in light of their longer-term impact. Traditionally when we hear "soft skills," we think of things like personality, behavior, management style, and human relations. Each of these areas is easy enough to read and talk about, but how can you actually bring about change in your own skills. Some people think you can't, and since believing is the first step in behavioral change, they face a tough uphill battle. Researchers and practitioners are increasingly convinced that soft skills can be developed and improved, though it's not an easy task. It's important to emphasize we're not talking about changing basic behavioral tenancies; we are talking about developing skills that allow you to work and lead more effectively.

Since most of us view any effort at behavioral change daunting, break the change process down into workable segments and start practicing. Any new skill is virtually impossible to learn all at one time. Instead, first identify those behaviors and interactions you want to improve, write them down, and start practicing one at a time, just as you would if you decided to learn tennis or golf. Select areas where you

are confident you can make progress. For example, identify an issue with a direct report where you believe you can work more effectively as a team. Next, identify the behaviors that need to be changed and the process options for discussing and effecting such change. Don't expect miracles. Be honest in your communication. Recognize that your initial efforts may fail, so think carefully about the process (timing, sequence of events, etc.) so you can make adjustments. If you see progress, celebrate and acknowledge it. Set goals and priorities for improving your interactive skills with your supervisor, co-workers, and direct reports. Get feedback from others and make appropriate changes. Take feedback to heart and put it into action. As you practice confronting and resolving difficult issues, like any other skill-building activity, you will find you are better equipped for the next event and you'll begin to see and appreciate your own professional development.

MENU, PLEASE

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