

## **/// Supporting My Team!**

In our last column, we talked about frustration. Apparently, this really hit a nerve as several people have approached me about various frustrations that concern them in the workplace. The one that I think touches the most people in Quality Management is **“How do I ensure my team gets the appropriate recognition and support for the work they’ve done and the results they’ve produced?”**

It can be incredibly disheartening to you as a manager, and to your people as contributors, to work “over and above” and find that there is little to no appreciation for what you’ve accomplished. As most of us have found out, it’s easy to be taken for granted in the workplace! Depending upon what else is happening in other parts of the organization that also demands attention, this can be a major issue for us and our people. I have worked with teams that have done amazing things that were absolutely eye-watering, with levels of effort that bordered on the superhuman, only to have the executive team respond with a shrug, or worse, tell them they expect that level of commitment every day. Now don’t get me wrong...I’ve spent most of my life working with Special Forces in the realm of Counter-Terrorism and I was the program manager for Fighter Pilot training facilities around the world. I set and demand very high levels of expectations for myself and I accept nothing less than the best my teams have to give. But nobody can deliver 150%, 8-hours a day, 6-days a week routinely. So when people do something truly awesome, one of our prime jobs as a quality professional/leader is to ensure it is recognized and valued by the organization appropriately and timely.

A very good friend of mine just had an experience with his student team development week for a major university last month. As part of the team building experience, they completed a major Lean Six Sigma 5S event in two of the labs on campus. They included a machine shop and related areas that had not been “deep cleaned” in decades. They set very stretch goals for themselves and exceeded even those in less time than anyone at the university believed possible. They worked from sunup until close to midnight every day for 7 straight days on this project and really poured heart and soul into what they were doing. As is typical of these type projects, an out brief was scheduled with one of the top administrators of the university. They were specifically invited to both show them the value that had been delivered, and for them to provide supportive feedback and constructive appreciation to the team for what they had accomplished against all odds.

Most of you with experience already know where this story is going...The administrator did not see the team in the first lab he visited and was heading home until my friend tracked him down and applied serious arm twisting to get him to at least spend a few minutes with his team. The message to the team (and to my friend) could not have been clearer. “You and your efforts are no big deal”. When building a team or creating a culture of excellence, all your hard work and sweat equity can go up in smoke in mere seconds if this happens. And while this is a pretty egregious example, this is exactly what happens to us and our teams on a far too often basis.

Let’s look at how we get in front of this to ensure it doesn’t bite us when we least expect it.

1. Avoiding this begins when you are in the initial planning stage for your team’s project. Take the invitees on a pre-event tour of the area so that they will have context for the

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improvements they will see. Find out their availability and schedule your team around them to ensure they can support you fully! Decide very early on what the deliverables for the project are going to be and how they will be “packaged”. Most good project plans begin with the end in mind and build backwards. This is no different.

2. Decide who the audience is going to be for your team’s efforts. Invite them early and often. A major failure mode I’ve fallen into myself and seen with others is to invite once and assume they will show up. Officially invite them during the initial tour then do a multi-media follow-up. Face-to-face, e-mail, phone calls, and getting your outbrief on the staff meeting agenda items are all effective ways to reach somebody multiple times. Don’t become a pest, but make sure they know how important this is and what they can expect to see and hear at the team session.
3. Spend time coaching them on their role in the out brief or meeting. Don’t just assume that when they see or hear the results they are going to swoon. Understand how each invitee typically responds and develop a plan to tailor the out brief for them. Let them know what you are trying to accomplish with the team so that they are fully aware that this is about more than just the results of the activity. If possible, arrange a photo op with them and the team for publication. Often, they are looking at your accomplishments in the light of everything else that is going on in the organization and without insight, they are going to provide their normal response to something that you need to be “over and above”. Never assume people know what you are trying to do just because you know...
4. Make certain they know that they will be expected to comment appropriately on the team’s results at the end and give your team encouragement for the “bigger picture goals” you are trying to achieve with these activities. I hate to say it, but not everyone is focused on team building and development of our people. Be aware of what is going on in their area of responsibility so that you can help them put all of this into proper context.
5. If, despite your best plans and actions, you get to the finish line and it “blows up” on you, have a plan prepared ahead of time as to how you will handle the situation. Most importantly, keep your emotions in check! Do not let your ego write a check you will regret cashing later. Use the situation as a learning opportunity for your team and work with them to figure out how to overcome the adversity and make something positive out of your experience. Thinking this through ahead of time can make all the difference!

If we plan and strategize the encouragement and acknowledgement of our people’s success like we plan our projects themselves, we will make certain we are never faced with a catastrophic disappointment. It’s our job as quality leaders to protect our team members and help them achieve their full potential as our future Quality Professionals!

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