

BUILDING LEADERS

MAKING A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE WITH KNOWLEDGE WORKERS



Simply stated, a knowledge worker is somebody who knows more than their boss about the work they do. Further, for the purposes of this column, let's also describe knowledge workers as people who care. Where they work matters (they buy into the company's purpose), and what they do matters (they take pride in the quality of their contributions). In short, these are valuable resources and in very strong demand!

So, if you are interested in more effectively aligning your leadership efforts with the knowledge workers in your organization, where should you turn for advice? We would emphatically suggest Alan Mulally and Peter Drucker.

KNOWLEDGE WORKERS ARE THE PEOPLE WHO EVERYBODY GOES TO WHEN NOBODY KNOWS WHAT TO DO.

Alan's storied career is well-documented. He began as a talented and dedicated knowledge worker himself (long before the term emerged) and soon became a manager of others with similar pedigrees and potential. From that point forward, he chronicled his experiences as a leader and manager at both Boeing and Ford to write his book, "Working Together: 12 Principles for Achieving Excellence in Managing Projects, Teams, and Organizations." Here are three

elements of that system we feel are worthy of review for anyone aspiring to establish and cultivate a work culture that meets the needs of contemporary knowledge workers.

ONE PLAN

When you hear Alan talk about things like organizational strategy, objectives and communication, you can't help but think about a bunch of people gathered at some sort of a monumental athletic event. That event is taking place at a massive stadium with a huge scoreboard. The scoreboard is clearly and easily accessed by everyone in attendance and is updated in real time to accurately reflect the action that is taking place on the field.

People that excel at their chosen profession and take pride in their contributions are like players, coaches or fans in that stadium. They want to see their team win, but along the way they have a need to see how things stand.

ZERO TOLERANCE

Inevitably, knowledge workers live on the edge. They are the people who everybody goes to when nobody knows what to do. Think of the scene in "Apollo 13" where a team of NASA scientists is trying to figure out how to get Tom Hanks and Kevin Bacon back to earth safely. What happens when your organization is in a crisis due to disruptive change? Somebody huddles the knowledge workers up and presents the problem that needs to be solved.

Guess what you can't have in those settings? Sarcasm. Pettiness. Backstabbing. Alan Mulally instituted a cultural norm at Ford that he coined "zero tolerance for bad behavior," and he enforced it. In that regard, his leadership efforts were more focused on how people were treating each other than anything else.

EGO

It is impossible to effectively lead knowledge workers without recognizing the incongruence of the traditional organizational hierarchy for that objective. As Mulally taught us, you have to check your ego at the door.

If you think about the best boss you ever had, chances are you would describe them as a person who gave credit to others and assumed responsibility when things didn't go as planned. Conversely, if you were asked to think about your worst boss, you would likely reverse that pattern (they figured out a way to take credit when things went well and blame others when they didn't).

Which reminds us of something Peter Drucker used to say eloquently and often: "Our mission is to make a positive difference, not to prove how smart we are." 🍷

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