

thing positive in any situation? You don't have to be a Pollyanna, but do lead off with a can-do spirit, no matter how rough things get.

The most discouraging words to a manager are an immediate "That can't be done." Even when something looks like a stretch given the time and resources available, try saying "Let me think about that and get back to you on Tuesday." Your positive attitude and open mind will go a long way toward building an *esprit de corps* with your supervisor.

In conclusion, picture two employees. Both have adequate training, an advanced certification and 5 years experience. Both have a strong job performance. One sits in her cubicle doing only what is asked of her, while the other takes advantage of educational, networking and team-building opportunities. When the project they're both working on gets downshifted from high to low priority, which one do you think will go first?

## Commando Strategic Planning

The 1990's introduced three important words into the business vernacular: Vision. Mission. Values. Vision, we were told, means what you aspire to be, while your mission is comprised of the steps you'll take to get there. Your goals, we learned, advance your mission.

Identifying our company's vision, mission and values became a hot topic. Businesses invested in retreats that lasted for days. Untold hours were filled with discussion and exercises aimed at identifying the Big Three: Vision. Mission. Goals. It was a procedure that ultimately yielded results—but at what cost in time, money and energy?

Don't get me wrong. These three things—vision, mission and goals—are the bedrock of every business, every company, every organization. Building a vision and mission statement as a team is important. Setting goals is crucial. Taking the time to define these as a team makes all the sense in the world. My suggestion, however, is that you tackle strategic planning in a way that can abbreviate the process without sacrificing the outcome. When you can keep the group focused and provide appropriate direction, you can arrive at consensus in hours rather than days.

Start the process by doing your own analysis. After all, as the leader of the group, you are the one who will ultimately be accountable for its success or failure. Therefore, giving the matter some thought before you take it to the group is well-advised.

Where to begin? Consider your own mini-SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a group, team or organization? What opportunities exist for you in

the marketplace to leverage the best you have to offer? And, finally, what are the threats you must get around to achieve your full potential? Spend some time reflecting on those four areas, and you will be better prepared to facilitate a group strategic planning session.

To further guide you in the strategic planning process, try listing all the functions of your organization: sales, marketing, service, production, staff development, quality assurance, etc. Using a scale of 1-5, rate each of these areas. Your goal is to see balance across the board. For example, excelling in sales when the quality assurance rating is low is going to result in dissatisfied customers. Use this mini-exercise to zero in on areas that need to be addressed.

While you don't want to do your strategic planning in a vacuum, taking the time to formulate some thoughts and ideas in advance of the group session makes sense. Arrive at some conclusions about where you'd like your team to go, and use them as a place to start. Be flexible. Get team buy-in. Strive for consensus, but don't be afraid to guide your team in a winning direction.

## *Customer Service: Both Sides of the Story*

### *Part I: Dissatisfaction Guaranteed*

It's not a matter of "if." It's a matter of "when."

Sooner or later, your dissatisfaction as a customer is guaranteed. Despite everything that's been written about it, good customer service is still the exception rather than the rule. In fact, some would say that customer dissatisfaction has become the norm.

Many blame technology, and the impersonal set of customer encounters it now directs—phone trees, automated teller machines, do-it-yourself scanners at the grocery store, electronic billing, and email. For all the convenience these technology-driven alternatives offer us, there is a price to pay. When things go awry, are there any human beings around who can help? Quite often, the answer is no. And frustrated customers who don't get what they want or need are not happy campers.

Getting real people behind the counter or at the other end of the phone is no guarantee of a pleasant experience either. That timeworn adage seems to have gone the way of the full-service gas station. You don't see either very often anymore. In fact, the standard of good service has sunk to remembering to give a receipt, or asking "Do you want fries with that?"

While we all have our favorite examples of the jovial delivery person, the especially attentive waiter or the