

Which Boat Are You In?

By Trenton Hightower

Paul Mallory, one of my mentors during my career with Dale Carnegie, used to tell me that managers are in two different boats with regard to education and training. In one boat, he maintained, are the managers who avoid education and training unless it is mandated or required, ultimately forcing their employees into classes to mitigate a crisis or meet a compliance deadline. In the second boat, according to Mr. Mallory, are the managers who view education and training as a way to build team, and get buy-in from their employees on the company's goals and objectives--from orientation through performance reviews and every ordinary day in between.

For purposes of this article, I've dubbed the short-sighted gang in the first boat "myopic managers," and the group in the second boat "visionary leaders."

When things are going smoothly, the myopic managers see little need for education and training. During a sluggish economy, their already marginal interest wanes from slim to none. They simply lack the foresight and scope to anticipate any needs that may be "down the road" or "around the corner." The saying "An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure" falls on deaf ears for the short-sighted gang in Boat #1.

In short, myopic managers are only interested in education and training as a way to mitigate a crisis. By the time the myopic manager is motivated enough to consider personal and skill development for their employees, chances are there's a situation in the office that is already out of control. Where there might have been only smoke, there is now a raging fire. Productivity has decreased, morale is plummeting and more than one employee—usually the best of the lot—is looking for a box to pack up his or her desk and move on.

On the other hand, our visionary friends in Boat #2 are pro-active. Not only do they pay careful attention to hiring the right employees, visionary leaders make it a priority to identify the ongoing training programs that will give these carefully-chosen employees what they need to avoid the danger zones. From employee orientation through the periodic performance review and every ordinary day in between, this type of leader is committed to giving employees access to staff development, skill-building and personal enrichment opportunities.

Visionaries are far more likely to make the investment in the reward and recognition programs these employees are going to need to stay connected and motivated. Even when times are tough and the budget is lean, the visionary leader understands the value of training to keep their staff conditioned to hit the ground running when the economic tide turns.

The difference between the two groups' approach to education and training is illustrated clearly in their responses to the following scenario. Most businesses, companies and organizations must operate within guidelines from an outside agency. Nursing homes, hospitals and other health-related facilities are held accountable by the Joint Commission for the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). Schools are subject to the guidelines set up by accreditation bodies like Middle States, and manufacturing concerns and factories are often regulated by the likes of ISO 9000.

Myopic managers will always seem surprised when it's time for the surveyors to visit, setting into motion a panicky, last-minute series of mandatory training classes to make sure their employees pass muster. Their approach is like a procrastinating student's to a final exam—wait until the last possible moment, “cram” as hard as you can, and hope you “pass.”

On the other hand, because the visionary leader's employees have been participating in consistent, scheduled education and training since the last survey, or audit, or evaluation, the panic factor is much less in evidence. Their certifications are up-to-date. Everything that needs to be done has been checked off the list throughout the year. The mad dash to the finish just doesn't happen for the employees who are lucky enough to work for a visionary leader.

Think of your own approach to education and training for your direct reports.

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