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Focus

A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group

The Power of Pull

Which is better?

- For an automobile: Rear-wheel drive or front-wheel drive?
- For a ventilation system: Forcing air in or using an exhaust system to pull air out?
- For training: A classroom environment or self-directed work on the Web?
- For managing people: Command and control or influence and persuasion?

Each of these questions is a push versus pull choice, and the answer to all of the above is: It depends on the situation. For example, evacuating people from a burning building is definitely NOT the time for a consensus-building exercise; a strong push (command) is the obvious choice. Nevertheless, nowadays a pull approach is usually more effective when you want to get the best results from people.

Effective leaders are always concerned with achieving the best outcomes within the constraints of available resources. Non-human resources (like money, inventory, and equipment) can only be managed; try to “persuade” inventory or “influence” cash flow. With people, however, a blend of managing and influencing delivers the best results. The key here, of course, is adjusting the mix of control and influencing to match changing situations. Understanding the difference between a push and pull approach is an important first step to getting the proper mix and improving outcomes.

With a top-down push model, management sets priorities and then allocates (pushes) human and other resources in a direction calculated to achieve organizational goals. As outcomes are measured, and operating results flow up the hierarchy, management adjusts its plan and then sends new directions downstream to the front lines. This is the classic command and-control model.

In contrast, a pull style pushes decision making as far down the organization as possible, and involves front line people in problem solving, new ideas, and aligning their personal goals with organization goals. This generates employee

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buy-in, increases the amount of brain power available to solve problems, and generally improves customer satisfaction. Senior management still retains strategic prerogatives and exercises important responsibilities, but views employees as human capital, not “just workers.”

We all need to remember to consider a pull approach when trying to move something or someone because our instinctive first response is to push, rather than to figure out how to pull. Pulling often turns out to be the easier and more effective method. The number of people (or objects) to be moved also makes a big difference. The push approach may work well for one or two, but the advantages of pull become pronounced as the number to be “moved” increases.

Consider cats as a metaphor for organizing a diverse collection of people. Domesticated cats have a well deserved reputation for independent action, and the term “herding cats” is used to describe the difficulty of coordinating the efforts of many different people or groups. You could pick up one or two cats and carry them somewhere (pushing), for example, but it would take a long time to move a large group this way. Using a treat to attract (pulling) all the cats at once would be faster and easier. The same concept would apply to inanimate objects. Pulling ten irregularly-shaped objects, tied or linked one to another is easy once the linkages are established. Conversely, imagine lining the ten objects up nose-to-tail and trying to push them, especially over irregular surfaces or around curves! Expanding on this metaphor, think about how many rough spots and unexpected changes of direction (irregular surfaces and curves) exist in our daily lives. Establishing linkages is also a prerequisite for pulling people. It takes some thought, time, and effort to build these relationships, but the results justify the initial investment.

Pull works better than push when maximizing people’s output for two important reasons. First, a pull approach automatically answers the ever present question, “What’s in it for me?” Even if the benefit is just avoidance of a negative consequence, a clear answer to the WIIFM question is compelling. Secondly, influencing through pull requires emotional engagement by the target audience. Getting to the WIIFM answer may involve significant input from and participation by the target(s), and this process alone, absent other benefits, motivates most people.

One of the important things leaders do is communicate a compelling vision. They make people want to be part of the team, and enthusiastically do what it takes to achieve the mission. Vision pulls. Leaders also listen carefully to their followers, and are attentive to the followers’ needs and aspirations. A good leader pulls people upward.

John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, encapsulated the essence of the pull approach with the following definition of leadership, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” Look for opportunities to pull more and push less. You will find life easier and more rewarding.

Tom Wagner

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Executive coaching, Strategic planning, & Employee training

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