



## PRINCIPAL ISSUES

# Creating Commitment

## Making your employees 'business partners'

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**I**t is your dealership. You own it. You built it from the ground up. You incurred all of the risk and rightly reap most of the reward. But, now the dealership has grown. You have a sales force, service technicians and administrative support. You even have multiple locations.

With that growth you have encountered a new, pressing issue — commitment (or lack thereof). Even though it is undeniably your dealership, you would like to create a higher level of commitment from all employees. That is tough, especially when you have an "8 to 4 and out the door" culture. It is even tougher if you have been autocratic or hierarchical in your leadership style.

So, how do you create a sense of ownership throughout the enterprise when, in fact, the buck really does stop at your door? How do you enable employees to become fully vested, in thought, word and deed, to the success of the enterprise?

What you want to create is a dramatic culture change. The shift will move employees from the "just a job" mentality to the "career choice" mentality and eventually to the "partnership" state of mind. Let us explore each of these thought trains.

It is easy to spot employees with the "just a job" mindset. They come in, do their work and leave right on time, no matter what. They seldom volunteer to do anything extra and often resent the request. This mentality is not necessarily negative. Many of these employees do great work within the clearly defined parameters of their job descriptions. However, you cannot expect them to do much more. Their families, hobbies, civic and social obligations have a more compelling hold on them than their jobs.

The second mindset, the "career choice," is somewhat more evolved. These employees take pride in the career they have chosen and actively seek developmental opportunities to continue their progress. Because employees in this zone work diligently on their professional development by pursuing education, training and other forms of skill-building, they have far more employment choices than the "just a job" folks. These are the people who can pick, choose and refuse when it comes to employers. As such, they may not have the highest degree of loyalty to your organization.



The third mindset, "partnership," is ultimately what we seek to build. They view themselves as business partners and are wedded to the success of the organization. This commitment is demonstrated in their high quality work, the superior service they provide to customers and colleagues, and their willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done. These are the folk who are always on the lookout for ways to improve processes, products and performance. They have a real, demonstrated interest in the good of the company, its employees and customers.

So, how do build a cadre of employees who are in the partnership state of mind? There are seven steps that will help you build commitment, concern and caring in your dealership. These steps require you to build dialogue and enhance rapport throughout the organization.

But before you can begin working your way through the seven steps you have to examine your leadership style. Does it lend itself to open communication? Is your style collaborative enough to draw out the best in people? What standards have you set in the company? This last question is especially important. It is much easier to build the partnership mindset when standards of excellence are already the norm. When mediocrity has been tacitly accepted the battle to raise standards and expectations is even tougher to win. Assess your

leadership style and the results honestly. That candid assessment will help you begin plotting the course for partnerships.

### Steps to a Partnership Mindset

These are not sequential steps. Rather they are activities that can be taken alone or combined to create the partnership mentality in the dealership.

#### Step 1: Support Innovation

Encourage employees to generate ideas about every aspect of the business. Test the ideas and incorporate the successful innovations into your business model. Reward employees for making suggestions, whether you implement them or not. This lets them know that you appreciate their input.

#### Step 2: Build Collaboration

Reduce your tendency to be an autocrat by establishing task teams to get things done. Make sure that your team composition crosses functional lines. This cross-pollination of ideas and approaches supports the innovation mentioned in step one. A word of caution: Don't assume that just because you throw a bunch of people together they will automatically become a team. Teams need clarity of purpose, shared goals and clearly assigned responsibilities. Be clear and honest about the acceptable parameters of teamwork. Invest time training people on team building. Collaborative skills do not come naturally to many people, they have to be taught.

#### Step 3: Create an Entrepreneurial Spirit

Encourage personal freedom and growth by abandoning nonessential rules. Allow employees latitude about choosing projects, work activities and assignments. Encourage risk-taking at all levels. When employees feel a sense of control they naturally become more engaged, because they are not being told what to do and how to do it. Fewer directed parameters allow creativity to flourish.

#### Step 4: Grow Leaders

Be on the lookout for talent, promise and potential. Invest in employees by making sure they receive ongoing developmental experiences. When you spot potential, create opportunities for growth via special assignments, training and other developmental experiences. Building leaders at all levels instills confidence and competence throughout the organization. Growing leaders is also an essential succession-planning tool. It allows you to keep employees invested in

the company and their work because of present and future potential for growth and recognition.

#### Step 5: Be Mission-Driven

This may sound like typical consultant rhetoric, but it is, in fact, a very real strategy. Organizations that have guiding principles articulated through a clear, concise mission that is easy to put into operation are far more likely to succeed at building partnerships. They are better able to rally employees around common objectives because those objectives are clearly comprehended.

#### Step 6: Clarify Values and Expectations

Equally as important as being mission-driven is the need to have clearly stated values and expectations. These factors create a level of self-discipline

that governs behavior. Values that are respectable and congruent allow employees to have a great sense of pride in the organization, its successes and objectives. When you have been successful at building the partnership mentality, employees will share these values. This will be demonstrated through their interactions with co-workers and customers.

#### Step 7: Reinforce Corporate Identity

This goes beyond everyone having matching golf shirts. Identity is reinforced through internal branding campaigns. Use staff meetings to remind employees of the company's victories, challenges and upcoming opportunities. Use them as a forum for departmental bragging. Encourage different departments to share the latest and greatest happenings. This builds collaboration, commitment and esprit d'corps. It also reduces myopia because people can see the big picture and understand how it impacts them.

Use these tools repeatedly until they become habits. They will help you develop partners who are interested in and committed to the success of the dealership. They will also help you wake up sleeping talent within your company. Be careful; you cannot take all seven steps at once. Select one or two to work on each quarter. Once you have mastered those techniques, move on to the next.

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