Building a Team of "Living It" Employees

Every team has three types of employees…those who are *hearing it*, *believing it*, and *living it*. My hope is that by the end of this article, you will have a firm grasp on which group of employees has the greatest potential to help the team reach its goal of being world-class. First, allow me to explain that the "it" in *hearing it*, etc., has nothing to do with one's competency or years of service in a given role. "It" refers to the level of commitment that employees have in their role, team, and organization. I am referring to how emotionally vested they are.

Let's begin with the *hearing it* employees. They basically have an "it's just a job" mentality. They come to work, do what they are supposed to do, take their required break and go home. These *hearing it* employees are capable of performing this way for long periods of time, while not contributing anything more than the bare

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minimum. Like I mentioned, the "it" has nothing to do with tenure. So the employee who has been on the job for 30 years can easily be only *hearing it*. Also, a new employee who may be justifiably apathetic because of a horrendous past supervisor, may also be only *hearing it*.

Over time, and with the right supervisor, that *hearing it* employee may move up to *believing it*. These *believing it* employees have bought in to the company's culture and enjoy their jobs. They understand the "purpose" of their role, team, and organization. They do their job duties, plus more. Take note, however, that while these believing it employees are reliable, steady workers, they are not "star" performers…yet.

These star performers are the *living it* employees. These employees consistently come to work early and leave late. They look for ways to contribute more. They have a burning desire to improve performance…not only for themselves, but for the entire team as well. They tend to be the informal leaders that others follow after the meetings have ended and the memos have been sent. These are the employees who actually create exceptional memories and foster customer loyalty through their exceptional service delivery. While the manager may lay out the strategy, the *living it* employees embrace that strategy as their own and go about the business of implementing the strategy. The

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manager relies on them. In fact, these *living it* employees can easily do the work equivalent to three or more *hearing it/believing it* teammates. They are that good.

Now that I have explained the three types of employees, allow me to ask a question. If your goal, as a manager, is to build a team full of *living it* employees, which group would you spend most of your time focusing on? By focus, I mean who should get the most

coaching, feedback, recognition, and developmental opportunities? Whenever I ask this question in my keynotes and workshops, most people say *hearing it*, then a smaller # say *believing it* and the minority say *living it*. While it is true that focusing on any of the three groups will likely lead to improvement, one particular group will stimulate the greatest results in the shortest amount of time with the least amount of energy from the manager.

Here is a brief analogy to illustrate my point. The winner of the 2009 NBA finals was the Los Angeles Lakers. They were the best team in the National Basketball Association (NBA), which is considered by many as the dominant basketball league in the world. On many occasions, the head coach, Phil Jackson could be seen giving additional instructions to Kobe Bryant, who is the Lakers' primary star player (*living it* employee). The same pattern is obvious during huddles, locker room talks, and practice sessions. Why, on earth, would this legendary coach, who has won ten NBA championships, spend

> *Why would this legendary coach spend additional time with the player who is already playing the best?*

additional time with the player who is already playing the best? Keep in mind that this player already scores the most points, leads the team in many other statistical categories, and is the unquestionable leader on the floor.

On the surface, this leadership approach of spending most time with the *living it* employees seems foreign to most leaders because the norm is to spend the majority of time with those who contribute the least. Giving most attention to the *living it* employees first, then *believing it*, and so on will require a major shift in how managers manage and how leaders lead. This point has to do with a basic, yet powerful, concept that can revolutionize how you manage yourself and others. It is often referred to as strength management or positive organizational scholarship. Essentially, it means that in order to get more of what is right, then you should focus on what is right. If you want excellent performance, then talk about excellent performance. If you want more employees to exceed customer expectations, then talk about exceeding customer expectations.

Focusing on those employees who underperform only sends the message that underperformance, not excellence, is your focus. One of the fastest ways to de-motivate your *living it* employees is to accept underperformance or mediocre performance from everyone else. Your *living it* employees yearn to work for a manager who demands excellent performance. They go from job to job hoping that this manager will finally be the one who models excellent performance, talks about excellent performance, rewards excellent performance, and chastises anything other than excellent performance. These *living it* employees want to be empowered and they want you to ask for their opinions.

An interesting point, however, is that *living it* employees will often tell you that they don't need any extra recognition, they are self-motivated, and they don't require anything further from you. Don't believe them! It is not true. Read the following very carefully. **Everyone who works hard craves appreciation and recognition.** They want…no…they **need** to know that their hard work and dedication are being appreciated. If the *living it* employees do not feel appreciated, they will either quit and leave, or quit and stay. Neither option is desirable.

One key takeaway after reading this article is to rehire your living it employees. By re-hire, I mean to spend some one-on-one time with your living it employee (or employees).

Ask questions such as:
- What motivates you?
- How do you (or would you) like to be recognized?
- From whom do you like to receive recognition? (they may prefer recognition from their customers or from co-workers)
- Do you prefer public or private recognition?
- What are your personal / professional goals?
- What are your hobbies / special interests?

Please understand that this approach does not mean that you should ignore your *hearing it* and *believing it* employees. This approach emphasizes that before you do anything else, make sure that those employees who are contributing the most (your *living it* folks) stay motivated, recognized, challenged, and involved. It is much more catastrophic for the *living it* person to become de-motivated than if the *hearing it* person becomes de-motivated. Unfortunately, far too many managers over-utilize and under-appreciate their *living it* employees. In fact, there are many *hearing it* and *believing it* employees who, at some point, were *living it*. They are just waiting for their manager to focus on excellent performance and be consistent about demanding excellent performance. *Living it* employees take exceptional pride in their work and it hurts when anything less than excellence is demanded from everyone on the team. Here is a quick management self-assessment:
- Do I meet with my *living it* employees at least once per month (to discuss their personal/professional goals, their strengths, their areas for improvement, the department's goals, and the company's goals)?
- Have I recognized them for excellent work (over the last one to two weeks)?
- Have I personalized the recognition for them?
- Have I solicited their input on anything (over the last one to two weeks)?
- Have I used them to help recruit and/or interview any new employees? (Who better to identify and help select <u>more</u> *living it* employees than your <u>current</u> *living it* employees?)
- Do they have the appropriate tools and resources to do the best job they can?

If you want to attract *living it* employees, then BE a manager who values *living it* employees. Become known for valuing excellence and treating your best the way they deserve to be treated. <u>Excellent</u> companies who are revered for <u>excellent</u> performance have a large # of <u>excellent</u> employees. Focusing on excellence breeds more excellence. *Living it* employees breed more *living it* employees. Therefore, I urge you to self-assess and re-dedicate your entire team to the one standard that matters most: Excellence.

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