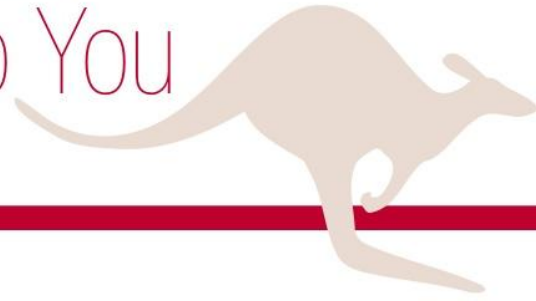


From Roo to You



November, 2010

Beware the “Middle Walker”

Recently, my ShareOn colleagues and I exhibited at the Nonprofit State Fair. We made some great connections and were pleased with how well we worked the booth together. It didn't take long for us to learn the flow of traffic and logical introduction points for other partners. It also didn't take us too long to recognize the body language telling us whether someone wanted to interact, just wanted some “trinkets and trash” or was trying to avoid any contact whatsoever. My colleague Rachel coined the latter group the “Middle Walkers”. These are the people who stay in the middle of the aisle and avoid eye contact; they don't want to be seen, let alone engage with others. While this may be fine for an exhibition hall filled with vendors, it isn't a very good strategy for growing your business.

I am sure each of you has observed “middle walkers” in your organizations. These are the people who stay in the shadows, don't offer opinions, and resist any activity with a hint of risk. These people plod along quietly, but they don't make you better. Will they challenge the status quo or suggest a better way to do things? I don't think so.

We hope this month's issue helps you understand when and how to step away from the middle, take the right risks, and how to support others resist the pull of the middle. As always, we welcome your input, insights and stories.

For You: Playing It Safe

With experience comes knowledge; with knowledge comes expertise; with expertise can come arrogance, apathy or complacency. Beware of the position or company where you have become too comfortable. If you find yourself saying “because we've always done it that way” there is a strong possibility you have succumbed to middle walker syndrome. You have a stable job, with decent benefits and mostly good people to work with. Your boss leaves you alone for the most part, and you have come to expect a 3% raise every year. Perhaps you hesitate to “rock the boat.” You can anticipate how different individuals and departments will react to different scenarios. You may see the train wreck about to happen, but if you don't speak up, you can't be blamed for anything that goes wrong. Or perhaps you have spoken up without success, which makes you wonder, “what's the point?”

Sometimes it makes sense to accept the status quo, but at other times you need to let loose your genius, take a risk or take a stand on an important issue. When executive teams discuss high potential employees or conduct talent reviews, the middle walkers are not the folks usually considered for promotion. The

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middle walkers stay put in the same job, performing the same process, and some may like it this way. If you want to progress and make a difference in your company, consider these strategies to distinguish yourself from the middle (and probably have a much more enjoyable work experience).

- 1) Pick the right issue: While I support everyone offering an opinion, if yours isn't listened to, think about whether it is important enough to pursue. If the decision is whether to serve coffee or pop at an event, let it go. If the issue is where to put the fax machine it probably isn't too important. If the issue impacts your ability to do your job well, or negatively impacts the business or your customers, state your case. Concisely explain your position, your reasoning, and the potential impact of not acting, or choosing different course of action.
- 2) Pick the right time: The end of the day is not usually the best time to reach a meeting of the minds with someone. Of course, my kids would tell you to never ask me anything in the morning – “Morning Mommy” can be a bit surly until she has at least two cups of coffee. The point is, be considerate of the person and/or group you need to meet with. Avoid scheduling two hour meetings with Finance when they are in the middle of month end close or Materials in the middle of Inventory audits. A friend once told me, “Your number one priority may not even make my list.” This was hard to swallow but I needed to learn this lesson. Before sitting down in someone's office, ask them if this is a “good time.” If it isn't, schedule a time to meet.
- 3) Pick the right advisor: It is easy to become so wrapped up in our individual positions that we forget about the broader business issue we are trying to address. Identify someone you respect in your organization – someone who understands multiple aspects of the business. Bounce your ideas or recommendations off her. She can help you refine your thoughts, play devil's advocate, remove barriers, and when appropriate, tell you that you are completely wrong. We all need someone we trust that respects us enough to tell us when we are about to “step in it”.
- 4) Pick your battles: Going to battle just for the sake of winning is not a good reason to take a stand. A former peer of mine would often ask, “Is this the hill I want to die on?” At least half the time, the answer was “no” after considering the significance of the issue. Although he disagreed with a decision he was smart enough to realize whether it was important enough to pursue. At the same time, there were several long, hard battles we fought that were worth fighting.



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For Your Organization: Making it Safe

Managers often lament that people don't show enough initiative; employees bring up problems but don't offer solutions, Department X knew something was going to happen but rather than raise an issue, they just watched the train wreck unfold. Employees spend more time on the "blame game" than actually solving problems. Is this an individual issue? A hiring issue? Perhaps it is a leadership issue. Even strong and confident individuals will hesitate to offer a differing opinion, take a risk or deliver bad news if leadership doesn't support risk-taking and straight talk. While most Employee Handbooks and mission statements talk about "open door policies", integrity, and honest communications, how many of these lofty aspirations are actually practiced in your organization?

Your business plan doesn't state you want to be "in the middle of the pack" for your industry, so take time to make sure your statements and your actions aren't encouraging "middle walker" behavior. Middle walker behavior leads to mediocre performance. If employees feel it is safe to express a contrary opinion, safe to try something different, and safe to fail on occasion, your business will be the better for it.

Below are a few questions to help you reflect on how "safe" it is for employees to take risks in your company.

1. The last time an initiative or project failed, how was it handled? Did the team take time to deconstruct the project pitfalls, and take responsibility for missteps along the way, or did participants and leaders immediately start using the corporate salute?



Blaming behaviors make it less likely that employees, managers and even executives will offer

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their best thoughts or raise concerns. Use a project management or communication system that ensures every participant has an opportunity to offer input at every critical juncture. Be sure to ask questions such as, “What haven’t we considered yet?” and “What could go wrong?”

2. How would you describe the most recent cross-functional meeting you attended. Often, different functions are driven by different incentives and metrics. Were everyone’s thoughts heard and interests represented? Did one group dominate the meeting? Does a given group always get their way? Were the right people even in the room? How did you ensure decisions were made based on the broader business needs, rather than departmental desires?
3. When an employee makes a mistake, how do you address the issue and then “move on”? Too often managers think their employees should just “get it” without establishing clear expectations. If the employee doesn’t know what success looks like, he is likely to make a mistake whether she is a line worker or professional. When that mistake does happen (and it will), do you acknowledge the mistake and help him learn how to get a better outcome next time, or do you “make an example” of this person, or hold the mistake over his head long after it should have been forgotten. While managers certainly need to hold employees accountable, it is equally important for employees to know that mistakes can be overcome and as their manager, you are there to help them become successful.
4. When was the last time you made a mistake or asked for advice? Admitting to our mistakes and taking ownership is important to establish trust and credibility with others. While acknowledging our failings and apologizing makes us vulnerable, it also strengthens our relationships. When you made your last mistake, did you own it and try to make the situation better? Or, perhaps you were struggling with what decision to make but weren’t comfortable asking for advice, since the leader should know everything. While confidence is important, I would suggest that part of being a leader is being humble and building a team that is “smarter” than you in your areas of weakness. Ask for advice when you need it, and apologize when you have made a mistake. Your employees mirror what their leaders do.

For additional support, consider a culture audit, employee engagement assessment or our “Values in Action” workshop.