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NEWSPAPER OF THE TWIN CITIES

Employers need to learn how to use existing talent

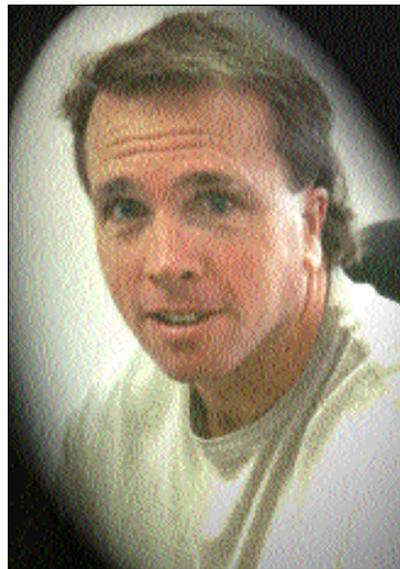
It's a mistake not to develop the potential of organization's greatest asset

By Gerry Sexton

A new Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce study says 70% of today's business leaders want to hire more skilled workers but can't find them. At the other end of the spectrum, "Chainsaw" Al Dunlap, CEO of Sunbeam, continues corporate America's love affair with downsizing by his commitment to eliminate half the jobs at his new company in order to "save" it.

The world of business has always been schizophrenic, and learning to manage paradox is something every leader faces. But, the challenge in this current paradox – Do we have too many or too few employees to keep our businesses viable? – may be one of the most complex and traumatic the business community has ever had to deal with.

Corporate America suffered when decades of "growth" turned out to be "bloating," and once-successful companies found themselves encumbered by hierarchies too inefficient to compete in increas-



ingly fierce markets. Unfortunately, the apparent logic of massive downsizing – the overreaction of the late 1980s and '90s – also fails to address the fundamental problem. The problem is not the *number* of people, it's the inability to unleash the *potential* of people.

We've got to worry less about whether we need more or fewer people in our businesses. We need to focus more on making full use of those we do employ.

How? By acting as if people are the organization's most important asset, not just saying they are. But that's not the same as trying to squeeze more out of people already working hard.

Hostile environments

Fortune magazine asked wryly in an

About the author

Gerry Sexton, M.D., is senior partner and chief explorer of GrowthWorks Inc., a Minneapolis, MN-based training, facilitation, and consulting company that specializes in helping organizations and individuals make effective change. He is co-author of the book *Leading Innovation: Creating Workplaces Where People Excel So Organizations Thrive*.

800.832.5385 / 763.420.5685

gsexton@growthworksinc.com

article recently: What's the difference between a chain gang and a corporation? Answer: On a chain gang you get to work outside. The point, supported by data from the Chicago-based survey firm, International Survey Research, is that many people feel they're being worked too hard because of downsizing. One manager told the researchers, "The company is suffering from self-imposed corporate anorexia... Top management just assumes that remaining staff will devote 50, 60, or 70 hours a week to get the job done."

People want to apply the skills, creativity, and innovative ideas they inherently bring to their jobs, but employers often

Continued...

Talent continued...

create work environments that turn off that energy.

Imagine doubling the size of your business without adding any new people. Senior management at Basic American Foods, a San Francisco-based food processing company with 2,500 employees, set that goal three years ago and the audaciousness of the challenge has forced everyone to rethink every process and procedure. They began to look for inefficiencies and opportunities to innovate anywhere and everywhere they could. As suggested by management guru Peter Drucker, they became willing to abandon everything they did. The company is changing dramatically – for the better.

Unfortunately, the Basic American Foods situation is all-too-unusual.

Research shows most people believe they could be more productive on the job, if given a greater chance to think, learn, discover, share information and try new ideas. But who needs formal research to tell us typical corporate cultures frustrate and thwart people who really want to make a difference? One trip to the corporate water cooler gives Scott Adams enough ammunition to load a month's worth of Dilbert cartoon strips.

Pillars of strength

People can accomplish much more than many of our work systems allow. They can create the conditions that make a company immune to current and future competitive threats. The companies most skilled at unleashing the best in their people – those closest to achieving “competitive immunity” – are focused on more than minute-by-minute problem-solving and crisis management. These companies create organizations built on four cultural pillars:

► **Perpetual Innovation.** There is a common belief and understanding, as well as an operational support system, that encourages and enables everyone to embrace change and withstand adversity. Leaders demonstrate that it's safe to take risks, experiment, explore new ideas, and constantly tinker with or even revamp work processes, products, and services. Management widely promotes innovation as one of the company's competitive edges.

► **Learning-Oriented Teamwork.** Learning and team problem-solving are recognized – and rewarded – as critical

success factors. Individuals constantly band together to solve problems and then pass on the learning so the organization becomes more intelligent. There is a strong emphasis on being able to capture and share new knowledge rapidly so that anyone who needs it has it.

► **People-Centered Management.** Everyone walks the talk when it comes to touting people as being the heart and soul of the organization. While everyone is expected to take primary responsibility for their own development, there is an organizational emphasis on building a community that nurtures growth. It's clear that personal fulfillment is a priority because of how it's tied into the company's success.

► **Shared Business Knowledge.** All employees are educated on the business the organization is in and the roles they play in its success. They get constant information about the changing marketplace and all the financial data they need to understand how the company is performing and why. The organization is filled with people who think and act like owners.

More isn't better

People are the key to gaining competitive advantage. But it's not about simply having more people. It's about having people who know how to learn like crazy, and unlearn when necessary. It's about having people ready, willing and able to tap into their imaginations. It's about people who have passion about what they do, and permission to express it.

Some say American business is short of skilled labor; others say it's bloated. It's a dilemma to understand when to grow or shrink a workforce in order to prosper, but it is a clear mistake to underuse the potential of an organization's greatest asset – the existing labor force. It can be fatal to perpetuate business practices that inhibit the aspirations and energy people bring to the workplace.

There's no easy formula for creating an innovative work environment. We're notorious in the American business world, however, for talking about people being our most important asset but not living up to the words.

Success in the 21st century will partly depend on hiring and firing the right people, but it will hinge even more on learning to unleash the innovative talent of the people already on the job.

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About GrowthWorks

WE ARE a training, facilitation and change-management company, quick to recognize organizations' real business problems and opportunities... and quicker still providing effective solutions and strategies to deal with them.

WE OFFER interactive meetings and events, training, organizational development services, consulting, team building, individual coaching and mentoring, leadership development, and strategic planning and implementation.

WE CREATE change projects for individuals and groups, ranging in length from a few hours to weeks, all built on our trademark **LOOP Leadership and Mess with Success** frameworks. We capitalize on your strengths and successes, tapping talent, skill, knowledge, loyalty, commitment, creativity and passion.

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Growth Works Inc.
18893 86th Place No.
Maple Grove, MN 55311
www.growthworksinc.com
(800) 832-5385 (763) 420-5685