

Building Excellence and Surpassing the Performance Plateau

by Richard Peirce

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Developing Great Employee Teams

A key challenge in the assessor's world today is keeping good employees and providing a highly productive work environment. That challenge will become even harder as Baby Boomers retire and Generation Xers and Third Millennium workers take their places. At present, almost 70 percent of government employees are eligible for retirement. If we do not plan ahead, we will face an employment crisis in the next few years.

Assessment jobs are very difficult, with daily pressures from taxpayers, tax units, and other stakeholders. Keeping employees focused, productive, and happy is no small feat. The old mindset, "If they don't want to work, I'll get someone else," is a bomb waiting to go off and derail the entire organization. Costs of education and training continue to rise and developing a new employee to the point of being productive is taking more and more time. The solution is keeping good people and providing an environment in which they can grow and feel that they are making a contribution. Yes, this is possible in assessment organizations. I have watched it work in my office, and I believe that if given the tools, we can create a great work environment while offering excellent public service at a reasonable cost.

Organizational Greatness

My first encounter with Stephen Covey was in 1992, when I read his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. In that book I found solutions to the staff burnout and frustration problems that I had observed in my office. I had watched as talented young people left after five to seven years, tired of the daily fights with taxpayers and always feeling unappreciated. Checking with the Covey Leadership Center, I discovered a video-based program in which Dr. Covey presented his "seven habits" in a three-day program that also featured a workbook designed to enhance the learning. I convinced our board of directors that this was a good investment, and in December 1993, I went to Utah to become a trained facilitator of that program. When I returned, I presented the program to the entire staff and even offered it free of charge to their

spouses. The feedback was marvelous. The work environment improved substantially, excellent public service became the norm, and people smiled. They still did their difficult and unpopular task of assessing property and determining taxes, but verbal battles lessened, data were shared, win-win agreements were reached, and positive public comments became the norm rather than the exception.

About two years ago, a new program was released by the merged company, now known as Franklin Covey. "Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results" offers wonderful ideas on how to develop an organization into one that produces excellence in assessment at a reasonable cost to constituents. The course is 21 hours of practical and useful ideas on directing employees toward excellence. It is not a superficial "dress for success" idea or the program of the month—it is a compilation of ideas that work year after year because they are based on success for every stakeholder in the organization.

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What is organizational greatness? Franklin Covey defines it as "performance related to your organization's potential with intensely loyal customers, intensely loyal and engaged employees, and an organization that is making a contribution to society." It is atypical of what society has come to believe about government, but this attitude can be changed. These prejudices can be overcome with consistent, courteous, efficient service.

Trust Is the Foundation

The program begins with a foundation of *trust*. Trust is not something that is in great supply in the assessor's world. We deal with taxpayers who don't trust us, we deal with tax representatives who we don't trust, and we may not even trust the people we work with. We surely don't trust management or the politicians who make the laws we must administer. So how do we improve trust in this environment?

The decision to develop a trust environment begins with the individual. Regardless of your position in an organization's hierarchy, you can have an influence on trust. If you are a manager and you are trustworthy, your subordinates will likely knock down walls to get tasks done. If you cannot be trusted, the entire organization will suffer. One way to determine the level of trust your employees and supervisors have in you is to have them participate in a test designed to measure trust. The test is administered via the Internet and the participants are anonymous. With anonymity, through the test, participants are more likely to tell the truth as they see it because they don't fear reprisal. Prior to testing, it is critical to assure all participants of your desire to get truthful answers so that you can improve.

Ways to improve trust are clear and honest communication, respecting the public and fellow employees regardless of status, righting wrongs, being loyal, delivering results, confronting reality, clarifying expectations, practicing accountability, truly listening, keeping commitments, and *extending* trust. Practicing these behaviors builds trust with all stakeholders.

Clarifying Purpose

The second imperative in building an effective team is to clarify purpose. In today's assessment office employees are pulled in many different directions. It is critical to focus the energies of staff members on the job to be done. The primary task is to produce an accurate assessment roll on time; however, it is easy to be pulled off task by the priorities of other departments or politicians who want to use property tax as a scapegoat for all the problems that exist in government.

One way to begin is to ask team members about the purpose of the work

group is. Some of the answers may be surprising. Managers are often amazed at how few people who work for them really understand the overriding purpose of their existence. Most organizations have a mission statement; if not, that is a great beginning point. Staff should be involved in the creation or modification of the mission statement, because if there is no involvement in this process, there is no commitment. Once the mission statement has been completed or reviewed, the next step is to develop a vision and purpose for the team. Again, it is critical that employees be included in this process. Meet with them, listen to their ideas, and bring consensus to the task. Ask the team, "What is the specific job our customers (internal or external) are hiring us to do? How does our team connect with the organization's mission? How does our team contribute to the economic model (budget and income center) of the organization?"

Aligning Systems

The third step in the process is to align systems. In too many cases in government, we continue to perform tasks in a certain manner because "we've always done them that way." These systems may be what is obstructing operational efficiency. For example, many new tools are available to today's assessors. Field devices allow appraisers to update information in the field without a data entry clerk; maps are often available to appraisers on the laptop; and oblique photography allows appraisers to measure improvements that are behind locked gates.

Another example of aligning systems is how we choose to reward the work of our employees. In most government agencies, it is longevity, rather than productivity, that is rewarded. However, new concepts in government reward excellence through incentive pay and salary increases based solely on production and quality of work.

It is important to examine every system in the organization to determine whether the way in which work is being done is the best way. Again, the best people for analyzing the processes are those who do them every day. Often, these first-line people already know how to perform a

task easier, faster, or more efficiently, but have been told to do the task according to the company manual, and have never been asked for their input.

Another concept to develop is WIGs (wildly important goals). WIGs are the work that absolutely must be done or nothing else will matter. In most assessment offices, a WIG would certainly be producing an assessment roll on time. Another WIG could be keeping up with deed filings and sales information, because if these data are not timely, then taxes will not be collected accurately. Another WIG would be keeping a mapping system up to date. Another would be a CAMA system that produces values that are USPAP compliant (Appraisal Foundation, updated annually). If these tasks are not accomplished, then the other work we do won't really matter.

Society is very sports-minded, and when we turn on the game, the first thing we do is check the score. A manager is well-served if he or she develops scoreboards for the organization that show everyone how he or she is doing. Scoreboards should be easy to read and quick to understand and they should encourage team members to improve output. A line chart could show each appraiser and the number of accounts they have worked. A similar chart could be used for data entry clerks or deed readers. Most people are fairly competitive and don't want to be the lowest producer on the scoreboard. In larger organizations, a scoreboard could show production by team rather than by individual. Employees should be encouraged to come up with ideas on scoreboards. They will amaze you with their creativity and their involvement will increase their buy-in.

As you examine systems in the organization, survey your customers for their impressions. Some organizations use a suggestion box, but a more accurate response would probably be gained from a written or phone survey following a phone inquiry. The purpose would be to measure customer satisfaction.

Reviewing these findings, a manager may decide that changes in the systems are necessary. Don't be afraid to experiment. Use a four-step approach to process improvement:

1. Research to determine whether others have already tried what you are considering.
2. Develop a prototype and try it out.
3. Implement the new process.
4. Make adjustments and get better.

Unleash the Talent in Your Organization

A great leader does not *control* his or her employees, but *unleashes* them to reach their potential. An initial step in this process is to take a hard look in the mirror and ask yourself, "Am I really a control freak?" For many managers, an honest answer is "yes," but there is good news, you don't have to continue to be a control freak. If you are willing to relinquish control, your employees will likely surprise you with their willingness to work without you standing over their shoulder or second-guessing their every decision.

Three leadership activities are studied in detail in the Leadership class. The first is *Voice*. As you consider how you speak to your employees, think about how you want to be spoken to. It is critical to your success as a leader to affirm the potential in employees. Verbally compliment your employees when you see an action that is positive. It is fine to compliment in public, but criticize in private. You will find opportunities to affirm employees by getting out of your office and into the trenches with your people. Never ask your people to do anything that you are not willing and able to do yourself. This builds respect for your abilities and knowledge.

The second activity is *Setting Performance Standards* for employees. The traditional way was to command what was expected. With this type of method, employees may not rise to their potential. If the performance standard is average, the excellent employee may achieve the expected result in half a day of work. What happens then? Develop performance expectations with your subordinates by talking with them about the job and what they can do. When employees are involved with setting their goals they will likely set much higher goals than you would have set for them as their manager. Think about the following traits of good

performance management:

1. The manager and employee should decide what the results should be.
2. There should be clear goals with clear measures.
3. There should be a clear understanding of what happens if the employee succeeds
4. There should be a clear understanding of what happens if the employee does not reach goals.
5. The manager and employee should both rate results against set goals.

A great leader does not control his or her employees, but unleashes them to reach their potential.

The last activity of unleashing talent is to *Clear the Path*. Often, your employees will run into bureaucratic red tape or lack of cooperation between departments within your organization. You can be a vital resource to help make situations work out for everyone. Encourage your people to bring you problems they cannot get around as they encounter them. This will allow you to open doors, provide financial or personnel assistance, or any other steps that will further the goals of the organization. Clearing the path does not mean taking over—it means assisting someone else to achieve their goals that they might not have been able to do without your assistance.

The Great Leaders course is offered nationally in many major cities. Planned classes are listed on the Franklin Covey Web site at: <http://www.franklincovey.com>. IAAO is also planning to sponsor a course that I will present in Florida in the spring of 2009, where the program will have examples and applications specifically for the property tax business. The course will be the same as one presented in major markets throughout the United States. It begins with the use of an assess-

ment survey, available on the Internet, that is completed by a participant's supervisor(s), those who report directly to him or her, and peers. The assessment is intended to give the participant honest feedback about how they are perceived as a leader. The people completing the assessment questions do so anonymously. The results of the assessment survey are printed by the participant and brought to the class where the results are used to develop an action plan that caters to the needs of the participant.

The class offers ideas, through video presentations, from world leaders in management. There is discussion of the concepts presented and then participants use the ideas to develop plans for their own organizations. Six months later, after the class is complete, the planning is done, and the participants have returned to their jobs, they ask the same people to complete the same assessment. The results of that assessment are compared to the original and the participant then has an idea of his progress in the eyes of the people he or she interacts with daily.

With all the changes that are occurring in the workplace and the new types of employees taking the jobs of Boomers, it is imperative that today's assessment office managers understand the best ways to motivate and retain quality workers. The experience of the Taylor Central Appraisal District is that these programs have been very positive. Turnover is almost non-existent, personnel are happy and motivated, and the public is consistently giving our organization high marks. The median level of appraisal is .99 and the COD is 8. I believe that this motivational program will offer similar results for your organization and it has the potential to improve property tax systems everywhere. Make your plans now to join other assessment professionals in Florida as we learn the latest techniques to advance the practice of assessment administration. ■

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