

Reducing Conflict 41 Short Staff

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



I once graded a paper written by an MBA student. She wrote, "Short staff think only inside the box." The unusual wording made an impact, and I decided to write a blog on the concept.

Of course, she was not referring to people of lesser stature. She was commenting on the habitual practice of numerous organizations to run thin. These organizations have staffing levels so low that they compromise the viability of the business.

What is the "Right" Staff Level?

Knowing the "correct" level of staff is a tricky business for sure. I have done consulting for organizations where the employees scream about their overload. Later on, working with these same groups, people would grumble about how most people were goofing off. In truth, most organizations get only a small fraction of the discretionary effort inherent in the workforce.

I concur with Gallup. They measured that in the average company only about 1/3 of the workers were fully engaged.

What the Staff Says

Some leaders use the amount of screaming for more resources as a guide to hiring. If the whining is low, they figure the organization is running too fat. If people are complaining but toughing it out, they conclude things are about right. If people are becoming ill and if turnover is sky high, they grudgingly agree to put on a couple more people.

Gauging the level of staff based on the complaint level is dangerous. If things get too thin for an extended period, the best people just leave. The Great Resignation was a classic example of how that happens.

What About Creativity?

. I thought my student's comment on the impact that running too thin has on creativity was spot on. You can observe overworked people in numerous venues. When workers are stretched beyond reasonable limits, there is no energy to focus on creative solutions to improve conditions.

Let's examine a specific occupation as an example.

According to the Gallup Organization, the nursing occupation is the most-highly trusted occupation category. This was true every year since they have been measuring trust in organizations.

Nurses have so many critical tasks that they hardly find time to eat, let alone try to figure out creative solutions to problems. Also, during the pandemic, many health care workers were putting in double shifts just to handle the load.

Asking for that level of effort only works until it impacts the viability of the health professionals. I am only singling out nurses because it is easy to observe this situation; in reality, the problem occurs in numerous types of jobs.

Don't Exceed the Elastic Limit of People

In an effort to improve productivity, leaders stretch their resources like a rubber band. The problem is that if you do that, eventually you will exceed the elastic limit of the rubber, and it will permanently deform or just snap.

In those conditions, people are going to do the requirements as best they can. They will not be very engaged in improving the conditions. They become case hardened and bitter. When people feel abused, they go into survival mode. Continuous improvement is non-existent, so the managers get exactly what they deserve. It becomes a vicious cycle.

A Better Approach to Workforce Staffing

The antidote is to work on changing the culture so that the current workforce is producing at a multiple of their prior productivity. Work on trust rather than forcing existing people to work in a constant state of overload. It means investing in the resources you have and maybe even adding some. Continually cutting back in an effort to survive is a losing game. You may survive in the short term, but your long-term prognosis is terminal.

When I suggest to leaders that they need to invest in their culture, I often get an incredulous or outraged look in return. "How can we possibly afford to work on our culture when everybody is already at the limit of their capability?" Well, you cannot unless you change your attitude about how people work. Maintain the right level of resources so that you can invest in the culture. That path will ensure a better future.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He is author of the following books: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*