

Reducing Conflict 54 We vs. They

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



“We versus they” thinking is a common rift between management and workers. This article examines why this symptom is so common and suggests eight ways to mitigate the problem.

Lack of alignment

The fundamental cause of what I call the “two sides mentality” is a lack of true alignment. Most organizations invest big bucks into developing a “strategy.” Strategy includes things like Values, Vision, Mission, Purpose, Key Result Areas, Tactics, and Measures. Small groups of managers usually develop these essential concepts. They cloister themselves away in a hotel for a few days to bang out the strategy.

Ancient methods

Then the discussion turns to communicating this brilliant plan to the mass of workers. The objective is to get workers to “buy in” and commit to the strategy. Eventually there is a “rollout” of the information where managers communicate TO the workers. Notice the hackneyed expressions I used above are the actual words used, even today in the real world – amazing!

Managers give the presentation to half-asleep people who are sitting in neat rows trying not to yawn. A few polite questions follow the data dump, and then everybody goes to lunch. The managers meet in their own dining space. They congratulate themselves on clarifying the strategy and getting buy-in from the workers.

What really happened is that the managers demonstrated that they are clueless about how to create true alignment. Culture is created by their actions, not their words. Their attempt to get everybody “on the same page” backfired. It only served to drive the wedge between the management team and the people doing the work. Managers miss the reality that they keep doing the same thing hoping for a different result.

Some organizations actually do achieve true alignment of purpose throughout the enterprise. These organizations **always** blow away groups that have fractured perspectives.

A better way to obtain alignment

Bob and Gregg Vanourek have a whole chapter on alignment in their book, [Triple Crown Leadership](#). It is an excellent model. One key point they make is that the elements of the strategy must be developed **collaboratively**. Great leaders know that for people to truly embrace a concept, they must put their fingerprints on it. The authors write about how the alignment is a kind of cascade of information with full participation. The whole team generates the information organically over time.

The collaborative process allows all people in the organization to feel true ownership of the plan. The ownership becomes the foundation for alignment. How can leaders create this kind of culture? Here are eight ideas for leaders. They reduce the “we versus they” thinking and obtain the full energy of the team.

1. Leaders need to listen more

Agree upon a set of values that the entire team not only adopts but pledges 100% to live by. It is not enough to simply state the values. For true alignment, all of the values must be demonstrated all the time.

Clarifying a compelling vision of the future is equally vital.

2. Test the viability of concepts and be flexible

As ideas are put forth, look for common themes and keep working the information into a model. Make sure each person feels ownership.

3. Don't say things you cannot do

Once a stated value reveals managerial hypocrisy, it does more harm than good to put it on the plaque. It fosters a “They say it, but they don't mean it” mentality that enables “we versus them.”

4. Don't “Roll Out” the “Program”

I have found that having a big rollout program is often the kiss of death. Employees smell a canned program coming a mile away. They will go to the meeting with earplugs firmly inserted.

Instead of the big fanfare, share the information in small groups with lots of dialog.

5. Be willing to admit mistakes

In changing a culture, there will be mistakes made along the way. When managers admit they made a mistake it demonstrates vulnerability.

6. Build and value trust

Trust becomes the glue that holds the whole organization together in good times and in difficult times. The culture of any organization is a reflection of the behaviors of the senior leaders more than anything else.

7. Don't get derailed by short-term thinking

The daily and monthly pressures of any business will test the resolve of the team. The whole team needs to learn from the challenges and focus on the long-term vision.

8. Celebrate the small wins as well as the big ones

Recognize and appreciate all of the good things that are going on. Teach people that the reinforcement should come from all levels, not just the managers. Once the workers start practicing reinforcement of others, magical things begin to happen.

Conclusion

There are numerous other ideas and helpful tips that can add to the success of the team. It is possible to create real alignment where everyone in the organization is truly excited about progress. That culture eliminates the “we versus they” mentality between workers and managers. I wish more organizations could experience such an environment. It all rests on the quality of leaders to create that kind of culture.

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