



Creating an Action-Oriented Workforce: The Simple Principles that Can Take Your Team to the Next Level

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You've taken your time recruiting and carefully selecting a top-notch team. You've provided your staff with scrupulously comprehensive training. You've established open lines of communication with your employees, taking pains to ensure that everyone feels comfortable asking questions and raising concerns. You've done everything that a manager is supposed to do. But somehow, you still sense that something is missing from your team's dynamic.

Sometimes, even the most highly-qualified, carefully-composed teams encounter a bit of difficulty getting up to full speed. Although all of the right elements might be in place, your team may still lack that certain something that makes everything "click."

Action Orientation May be the Missing Ingredient

Management experts say that if there's something missing from your team that you just can't quite put your finger on, the problem might be a lack of the quality that is known as action orientation. This variable is a measure of a team's ability to solve problems, work proactively, address issues as they arise, and make consistent progress together as a group.

Although these qualities may sound like something you either have or you don't have, leading management gurus have developed an array of easy methods designed to help enhance a work group's action orientation. If your staff could benefit from a bit more get-up-and-go, consider applying a few of these tried-and-true techniques.

- **Make your directives as clear as possible.**

Ambiguity and confusion are both major drains on action orientation. If your staff's roles and responsibilities have not been clearly defined, or if the instructions you give are convoluted or overly complex, your team's ability to achieve optimal efficiency will be hindered. Get into the habit of handing out crystal-clear directives. After you've established a well-understood baseline of basic routines and expectations, you can begin to challenge select members of your team with more complex assignments.

- **Devise challenges carefully.**

Years of research into the mysteries of human motivation have shown that the best performance is achieved when the task

at hand is neither too easy nor too difficult. The trick is to find the right fit between individual employee's skills and abilities and the tasks that need to be performed. If the task assigned to a particular team member is too easy, he or she will likely wind up bored and distracted. On the other hand, if the task assigned is too difficult or complex, the team member may feel overwhelmed and helpless. The best way to position your team for optimal performance is to become skilled at assessing and assigning tasks that offer just the right level of challenge for each employee.

- **Whenever possible, offer in-depth feedback.**

A great way to encourage action orientation in your team is to provide constructive criticism after an employee has performed a problem-solving task. As soon as possible after a situation has been addressed proactively (or not-so-proactively), huddle with the team member and give them a rundown on what worked and what could use some more fine-tuning. It's important to maintain an objective, helpful demeanor during this informal feedback session. Remember, you're not only providing feedback - you're also giving your team a model of the way that action orientation works.

- **Encourage your employees to connect the dots.**

An important part of action orientation is linking even the most mundane tasks to the big picture. Take time out to remind your employees how even their smallest contributions help further the mission of the organization as a whole. Help them find personal and professional meaning in their duties, and praise them lavishly when they respond to challenges proactively in a way that demonstrates their investment in the company's success.

Action orientation is a somewhat subtle concept that doesn't get a lot of press, but a growing number of management experts have pinpointed this team quality as an important determinant of organizational success. With just a bit of targeted effort, though, you can significantly boost your group's ability to work together -- solving problems, tackling challenges, and getting done what needs to be done -- right. ■

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