

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Willfully Ignored

By Douglas E. Welch

Recent news stories have questioned the leadership of the FBI, analyzing its handling of intelligence reports prior to the September 11 attacks. It seems that information provided by various FBI field offices was never passed on to those in charge, and then to the decision-makers in Washington, D.C. In reading these news stories, I had the strange feeling that I had heard it all before.

In fact, I had. Every employee, especially those in high-tech fields, knows that management is not always receptive to their ideas. Sometimes, management willfully ignores the information and talent it has in its own backyard.

Not Listening

Regardless of the size of the organization, it is a simple fact that executives and managers often willfully ignore the advice, opinions and expertise of their in-house staff. Instead of listening to their own employees, they hire consultant after consultant to tell them exactly what their own employees are already telling them. Worse still, they may allow themselves to be led astray by consultants and vendors, and then blame their employees for not speaking up. No matter where it occurs, it is a ludicrous situation. As we can see in the FBI example, though, it can lead to unseen and dangerous consequences. For a company, it could put the organization on the road to mediocrity—or even failure.

Familiarity, it seems, does indeed breed contempt. Managers are always looking for new ideas. Unfortunately, they come to believe that new ideas can come only from new people. So, instead of helping their employees develop their new ideas, they turn to outsiders. I don't want to disparage all consultants. Everyone has a place in business today. Consultants can help companies that are moving into areas of business outside their current expertise. They can help to expose and analyze internal problems that keep a company from achieving its highest potential. Unfortunately, consultants are often hired more for the freshness of their faces than the freshness of their ideas.

Who's in Charge?

Too often, employees' opinions and ideas are discounted due to a number of errors in management thinking. Ego can sometimes cloud people's judgment. Perhaps managers feel threatened when employees offer suggestions on how to solve problems. They might feel that they

should have all the ideas since they are the ones in charge. Perhaps acting on employee suggestions presents political problems with their fellow managers. They could feel that accepting an idea from a marketing employee might hurt their relationship with the head of sales.

The life of managers can be fraught with such issues. So, they bring in consultants to support their point of view without stirring up the rancor of internal politics.

The Results

Unfortunately, constantly hiring consultants while ignoring employees' ideas has a number of bad results. First, consultants can be costly. Their hourly rate far surpasses that of employees and most managers. Paying out lots of money for few results can contribute to a company's failure instead of helping to prevent it. I believe it is important to make the best use of internally generated ideas before spending money on outside consultants. First, try to solve the problems yourself.

The use of consultants can also lead to lower morale among employees. No one likes to be ignored, especially when a consultant is being paid big bucks to proffer the same ideas that employees have been presenting for or months, or even years. Managers who come to rely on consultants might just find that they are increasing their problems instead of solving them. Employees who don't feel that their contributions are appreciated will soon find another job. Those employees who do remain will become increasingly embittered. Why should they offer new ideas or try to be more productive when their managers seem to care only for the opinions of outsiders? Managers could be planting the seeds of their own demise.

The time has come for companies to concentrate on using the expertise of their employees instead of searching elsewhere for validation. They need to listen more often and listen more carefully to those who have the most knowledge and largest investment in their companies.

I believe that most companies will find that they already have the talent necessary to grow their company. They should listen to their employees and apply their ideas in the best way possible. □

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