



Management and Performance Associates – November 2008

To be or not to be? That's the attitude!

“Work is either fun or drudgery. It depends on your attitude. I like fun.”

Colleen Barrett, President Emeritus of Southwest Airlines.

Every manager, sooner or later, has fallen into one of those typical and distressing traps. There is a job opening and the position requires “excellent willingness and ability to work in teams.” The boss’ boss becomes aware of the opening and soon lets us know: *“I have the perfect candidate for your job opening. Don’t waste a minute looking for someone else. I have asked her to see you tomorrow, and I’m sure you’ll be thrilled with her.”* These kinds of stories do not have happy endings: Our inability to explore the candidate’s past and actual application of critical competencies; our inability to say “no” to the boss’ boss plus the urgency to fill the position, they all add up to hiring the wrong person.

What was really fascinating about this candidate in the real life story that inspired this newsletter was that everything she had in her favor, teamwork, was counterbalanced by her negative attitude. When she wanted, and *if* she wanted, she could be the most communicative, influencing, collaborative and charming person in this world. Unfortunately the remaining 95% of the time, she was an encyclopedia of negative behaviors, pitfalls, excuses and accusations.

More than the obvious distress imposed to the team, the consequences on performance were brutal, in spite of great talent. The off-putting attitude of the “thrilling candidate” was contagious. We don’t mean to say that she was doing anything illegal or unethical; she was just wrapped up in jealousy, bad humor, gossiping, conspiracies and lack of self-criticism. Perhaps, one of the most complicated moments we had to deal with was when a client called to alert us of his problems caused by the “bad attitude” of this person.

But... what shapes our attitude?

In each stage throughout our lives, several factors will strongly impact us. From our personality preferences; the education we receive; the society, culture and environment in which we live in; everything that we hear; our beliefs; personal and professional experiences; our social status; the opportunities we’ve taken advantage of (and the ones we haven’t), to more intimate topics such as the image we have of ourselves—everything shapes this ubiquitous and invisible entity that we call attitude.

Therefore, it is vital that we become aware of the factors that shape our attitude, which translates into our present behaviors and forecasts our future. When we hear someone telling us “with this attitude you will not go anywhere” it’s probably time to think about changes.

In our role as people managers, when we’re acting as coaches and/or mentors, we often find ourselves at a crossroads where we don’t know how to deal with someone’s “bad” attitude, but what about our own attitude?

Here are some recommendations:

- **Do not ignore your present attitude**

In order to change anything, the first thing necessary is to know where we stand: to understand where our attitude comes from, what determines it, regardless of how painful it is. Seeking help is the way to go if we don’t have a strong self-assessment ability or strong self-awareness, like our “thrilling candidate.” Ask for feedback; understand what others see in us. Why do I behave as I do? What is the impact of that? Careful, there is a risk we won’t like what we find out....

We can do it only by understanding that the benefits of improving our attitude will be greater than the efforts involved.

- **Define which is the correct desired attitude**

This is an extremely hard to define concept, since “correct attitude” is somewhat subjective. The first step is to define how the correct attitude could help



us to reach our goals, to improve our interpersonal relationships and to be a better professional and person. The second step relies much more on dedication and effort than inspiration.

To reduce subjectivity, the correct attitude should be defined under the SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant to our performance and Timely)

- **Work hard on changing behaviors**

Changing the established behaviors (those which entrap us in negative attitudes) will make it possible for us to follow our desired path. It is sad to see people, sometimes effective influencers, hiding behind attitudes that they are proud of, when in fact they should be running away from them: not greeting, not listening, not demonstrating empathy, conspiring, causing a negative impact on people—you know the type. To avoid falling into this trap we recommend taking an inventory of our “obstacle behaviors:” what did I do?; how often do I do it?; what are its causes?; what was its impact?; was it an exception or is it a trend?; and finally, what can I do differently next time?...

Let's become aware of our attitudes before others make us do so.

- **Create a virtuous cycle**

Recognizing our negative attitude will allow us to change it: changing it will allow us to be free from it, and finally, being free from it will allow us to focus on other non-conducive attitudes that need to be improved.

An endless cycle brings strong benefits.

If you allow us the freedom to re-write Colleen Barrett's quote, the following is our reflection:

“Fun or boring, pleasant or inconvenient, positive or negative, professional or improvised, a help or an obstacle... It all depends on our attitude. To be or not to be, that's the attitude”

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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