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INSPIRE LEADERSHIP:

Building commitment: Assume less, agree more

To reduce frustration and have your employees achieve their objectives more often learn how to manage through “agreements” rather than through “expectations” or “assumptions.”

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In past columns I have described selling behaviors that increase sales and profitability. But how do you motivate salespeople to discard old behaviors in order to adopt new ones that work better? Over the years, I've learned that those who manage by agreement—rather than expectations or assumptions—are best able to encourage others and build their business through them.

Appraising the Situation

Answer the following questions to evaluate how well you're managing by agreement:

- Are you often surprised and disappointed by employees failing to do what they say they'll do?
- Does it sometimes seem as if those around you lack sufficient commitment and accountability?
- Do the reasons people give for not doing things seem real or like excuses?
- The last time you asked a sales associate to do something new, did you walk away knowing he could do it? Did you believe he would?
- When you last asked an employee to do something, did you simply tell her to do it? Ask her to do it? Or include her in a discussion?

Best Practices

Here are some tips to help you do a better job of managing by agreement:

Don't tell, sell. The best managers sell their ideas. Many of the principles we've discussed for selling products also apply to selling ideas. The two most important are: Ask good questions, and listen well. Before you tell an employee to do something new, find out if he can do it and ask what he thinks about it. When selling ideas, you first need to understand before being understood.

Be inclusive. Agreements, by definition, are inclusive, not exclusive. When you bring up an idea, make the conversation two-way and ask the employee how she would implement it. High involvement produces high commitment.

Avoid ambiguity. When you forge an agreement with an employee, you need to clarify six critical elements: what, why, how, when, possible obstacles, and what's next (i.e. following up and measuring progress.) Each is a potential point of misunderstanding, disappointment, or ineffective follow-through. So, for example, if you're discussing ways a sales associate will up-sell more products, you should discuss what specific new behaviors are involved, why these behaviors are involved, why these behaviors are important, how the employee will benefit from them, when he'll start, what problems may be encountered, and

when you will meet to evaluate progress.

Probe for potential barriers (and deal with objections).

Even effective managers can fail to handle this well. That's unfortunate, because obstacles are the most common source of excuses for not completing a task. Uncovering and discussing obstacles beforehand eliminates excuses. If the employee raises an objection, first make sure you understand the real concern, then address it.

Close by summarizing, confirming, and reinforcing the value.

Just as with selling merchandise, you need to "close the sale" of a request by summarizing what has been decided, gaining confirmation from the employee that she agrees, and reinforcing the value to the employee of following through with the agreement. Once you've learned to make strong and thorough agreements with employees, you will seldom be disappointed or surprised by their performance. Clear agreements, however, don't happen by magic. They require conscious intention and a repeatable process to eliminate ambiguity and gain buy-in from all parties.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

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