

Turn Your Company into a Shortcut

A "shortcut" is an employee or organization that's indispensable. Here are strategies for using your best people to the utmost advantage.

I recently spoke to a client who is a senior vice-president for sales at one of the world's largest computer companies. She is in the midst of major layoffs, and she told me quite frankly that the employees who are being let go are "the ones who are not shortcuts." She continued: "There is too much to keep track of and too much to be done with fewer people. As tough as it might sound, if people can't figure out how to contribute and make themselves indispensable, then there is no place for them." This SVP embraces what I call "the shortcut culture."

Let's define culture as both the behavior you're willing to tolerate from your employees as well as a set of guidelines for the kind of people you'd like to keep and attract. When the two intersect, they create "the way we do things around here." A shortcut is a person, product, or organization that provides something we need, when we need it, with less aggravation and more precision than we could do ourselves. They do it with high quality, grace, and intelligence, and they are typically paid very well for it. It's a combination of high mastery and high emotional intelligence.

This Darwinian-like business climate is mandating the kind of corporate culture that focuses on leanness, expertise, and sticky client relationships. As leadership scrambles to clarify corporate directives in these unclear times, the one concrete concept that is redefining the corporation for the post-Darwinian business climate is the creation of this new culture. It is a way of operating that is measured and maintained. It's about your company and its employees working toward indispensability—an "I can't live without" entity by your customer's standards. It's a top-down proposition and not for the faint of heart—but then again, the faint of heart won't survive the economic downturn. In this market, if you or your company is not a shortcut to something, it's going to be a rough ride.

You are being watched.

Rules to Adopt

The building of such a culture has to trickle down to all levels—and this is where tactics are critical. Workers are so badly in need of shortcuts themselves that organizations need strategies and rules that can be easily adopted. Every company is going to be different—but following are a few of the procedures that you can adopt, adapt, or add to. The main thing to keep in mind is that the organization's highly visible senior-level leaders have to be "caught" doing these things on a regular basis.

The credo at the heart of this way of working and being is:

- Nothing is more important than filling the needs of our customer.
- Every customer of the company is the customer of each of us.
- We are each other's customers, too.

- It is each person's responsibility to spend a minimum of 30 hours per year to increase technical skills and knowledge, along with communication, negotiation, and critical thinking abilities. The company will enable this by providing the time and resources to meet this responsibility.
- We treat each other, regardless of title or station, with the same respect and dignity that we treat our valued customers.
- We value family and private lives in the same way we wish them to value our corporate family.

These are but a few of the tactics and guiding ideas that senior executives can exemplify through their consistent behavior around these principles.

You Reap What You Tolerate

In companies where negative attitudes and mediocre skills are tolerated, the message is sent that this behavior is acceptable. Over time, the organization as a whole behaves as most other mediocre organizations—with confusion, chaos, and ultimately bad balance sheets. When the behaviors listed above are expected, regularly measured, acknowledged, and their results lauded, the message is sent loud and clear about what is desired and valued.

For it to work, senior executives must agree to support the culture and practice and advocate it throughout the organization. They must talk about it in meetings and reinforce it with incentives and recognition programs; they must communicate the message by any means available. In essence, it's talked about, it's acted upon, it's rewarded—and it's talked about some more. It's not an exercise. It's a way of being.

You already have shortcuts in your organization but perhaps have not recognized them as such. Or worse, they have not been encouraged and rewarded for their expertise and excellence. If you trust and empower your best performers—your shortcuts—to do what they were hired to do, you will be pleasantly rewarded. You spend enormous resources recruiting the best talent available. Celebrate their abilities and expertise and expect the very best. To do anything less limits their ability to contribute and sabotages your results. Think about it this way: It would be like spending \$3 million on a Kentucky Derby contender and then treating it like a nag. If you want your superstars and your up-and-coming superstars to behave and perform like a shortcut—a thoroughbred—treat them like one.

In this economy, you need a team that behaves and performs consistently at the top of their game without you supervising their every move. A team of shortcuts will deliver the results you need. After all, how many hands do you have time to hold?



Scott Halford, CSP, is the president of Complete Intelligence and author of *Be a Shortcut: The Secret Fast Track to Business Success* (Wiley 2009). Contact him at www.BeAShortcut.com.