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Stinky Fish... the first in a series of An Executive Summary for Busy Managers.

This summary series has been designed for all of the busy managers out there. You know the ones... they don't have the time to even sit down and understand what their subordinates are suffering through, let alone pick-up a book and attempt to grow as a leader. I promise that these summaries will take you no longer than five minutes to read, perfect length for a coffee break!

A few weeks ago someone I know asked me about "the fish books" and whether or not I was going to employ their philosophy in my consulting business. I honestly had no idea what she was talking about. Turns out, "Fish" is an all the rage Management book series. Now, I am an aficionado when it comes to Management books. I have read them all... or so I thought. As quickly as possible I headed down to the library (remember, as a consultant I no longer draw a nice constant weekly salary so no new frivolous expenses for me) and get the elderly Reference Section lady to find all three of the books for me. Even the Reference Section lady had heard of "Fish" and was trying to give me a summary of the philosophy. Now I am feeling way behind on the whole "Fish" revolution that must be occurring in the Management ranks of every company in America. So, I stay up half the night reading every word on every page of the first book. Don't believe the hype. As bleary eyed as I was, there was no mistaking the smell emanating from the first in a long series of nonsense. And I say that with the deepest respect to the authors of the series.

Fish is a philosophy based on a bunch of hard working people in Seattle. These guys are for real. You can check them out at their website, www.pikeplacefish.com. Basically it is a bunch of people who have a rough job and figured out how to make it fun. They toss fish around, interact with the customers and even have fun while they're at it. This is the Utopia of work atmospheres if you listen to the authors of the book. However, if you read the book and not just daydream about work being fun, you will be in for a long, drawn out ride. The book opens with a very sad story about a lady who is forced into taking a promotion because her husband has passed away and she must support two kids (first clue, good philosophy does not need to pluck heartstrings to get a reader involved). The book revolves around a corporate operations group that is dreadful to deal with and is the butt of jokes for the entire company. As a matter of fact, the big cheese publicly names the group the "Toxic Energy Dump." (What is "toxic energy," is that like anti-matter???) Right here, right now I am going to give you the first little nugget that jumps from the pages of this book... the big boss supported and demanded change. Wow, having the big boss' support is like getting the key to the kingdom. Jimmy Buffet calls it Gypsies in the Palace; I call it an expense account.

I am convinced that I will get a lot of blowback saying that I just don't get it. And, that I should have read it closer to really understand the true meaning of what was being portrayed. Hmm... I think that a lady got put in charge of a group of employees and was told that she needed to enhance her people's performance. A great teacher once told me that the true definition of management is "getting people to do more than even they thought they could do."

The second nugget that the book offers is that the Manager involved the employees from the beginning of the change process. There was no big binder of things to do that each employee had to follow. The employees were given the facts (senior management thought of their group as a "toxic energy dump") and were asked to be directly involved in developing a solution. A rose by any other name is called empowerment. It is a proven fact that empowered employees can do amazing things. However, this is not a newfangled idea that just came about. On top of the empowerment, the boss, was willing to fund the change process. I am not talking about just balloons and party favors. I am talking about the

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indirect time that was spent by the employee teams to develop solutions and the offsite which became the big carrot at the end of the road for the employees to stay focused and get it done.

I promise you that if you get a senior manager to call your team a “toxic ‘waste’ dump” and then tell your employees that they can have an offsite to discuss what changes should be made to fix the work environment you will get all but the lowest of performers to come alive. Especially if you are responsible for a group of employees that never goes on business trips or even has cause to wander outside of their bullpen.

All in all, the first book was not that bad and it actually told an old story in a new way. I think what really turned me off was the second book in the “Fish” series. This book reads like an advertisement for the way of the “Fish.” Seriously, I think these guys should have paid us to read this book. It did have twice as many pages as the first book but it was still the same price. It talked about how a lot of big name companies have invoked the way of the “Fish” and how they are benefiting from making work fun. Hmm... I want you to picture your boss dressed up like Elvis walking into work with a guitar singing. If there is even a .01% chance of that happening buy this book so you can get some insight on how to pull it off. And then send me a picture so I can put it on my website (I need the increased traffic).

The third book is another emotional rollercoaster that takes place in a hospital ward. This time the story is about a Sushi restaurant and how to keep the energy alive. This one can be summed up in one word, “communication.” It turns out that by communicating with your employees you will be able to keep them energized. Imagine that, your boss makes the time to really listen to what you have to say and you are a happier employee for it. Yup, another timeless lesson taught in a much more dramatic way. Communication is the single most important thing a manager does. And that communication must go in four different directions. It must go back and forth with those above you and it must go back and forth with those below you. It is very easy to think of yourself as a communicator just because you decree Senior Management’s vision to your subordinates. Sure, you are communicating, but are you doing anything to help them? Your employee’s need to know that you have the capability to listen to them and that you have the intestinal fortitude to carry the message up the line whether it is good or bad. That will allow you to have an employee that trusts you enough to tell you the good, the bad and the ugly. Maybe the next “Fish” book will be about diving with sharks as a metaphor for learning Trust.

If you have a few hours to kill, read the first book. If you have enough time to read volumes two and three, spend it with your significant other instead. That investment will have a much bigger payoff.

Just my opinion and we all know what “they” say about opinions...

Thanks
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