



BY STAN POHMER

Monkey Trouble

Being a good manager takes more than just feeding the animals.

By taking on the responsibility of making, or being involved in making, all of the decisions, we lose the opportunity to develop our team into independent, thinking, confident and responsible employees.

These were the words on a sign that I had mounted by the entrance of my office when I worked for many years in retail buying, merchandising and marketing.

Most people thought this was simply my way of displaying my denial, hoping against hope that I could change the pace and demeanor of my office just through the sheer power of positive suggestion. Others thought it was the epitome of sarcasm because, in the heat of the spring season a zoo would have been a better, kinder, gentler place to be than my office.

I think most of you can relate to this...whether you're a grower or a retailer. When spring hits, it hits with a frenzy, and no amount of planning can ever compensate for or take into account the myriad of problems, challenges and opportunities that have to be taken care of with a very high degree of urgency throughout the day. I truly believe there's a little bit of the masochist in all of us who deal with outdoor live goods. Deep down inside, we all get energized and jazzed by the hectic pace and the rush we get in trying to catch up to (forget about getting ahead of) the curve...making the seemingly impossible, possible. The truth be known, I think this is part of the reward of being in this business...we're basically all adrenaline junkies!

Setting the Tone

But back to my sign...“My Office Is Not A Zoo!” There really was a purpose for having this, and it helped set the tone for me and my team of buyers, merchandisers, inventory managers and field personnel. It helped set a level of expectation that everyone had to consciously think about when dealing with problems and opportunities, what I affectionately labeled as “monkeys.”

As good managers, we all want to maintain an open door for our team, cultivating an attitude or even a culture of being approachable. Human nature being what it is, when someone has a problem, especially one that the individual hasn't dealt with in the past, the path of least resistance is to bump the decision up the line, avoiding not only the possibility of making a bad decision but avoiding any decision at all. And the optimum for this employee is to move the monkey, that problem or decision, onto someone else's back or to bring the problem into my office and leave it there, forcing me to deal with it, not them. Now, please don't confuse this with upward delegation, an art form that takes many years to perfect; I'm just referring here to moving problem monkeys around.

Now, there are some managers that thrive on making all of the decisions, feeling the compulsive need to be “in the loop” on everything that's going on. But being overly controlling inhibits the abil-

ity to develop a big picture outlook, something that at least one person in every organization needs to maintain. If one gets bogged down in the minutiae, it's impossible to keep things in perspective, focusing on the major critical issues that have the most impact on business.

And by taking on the responsibility of making, or being involved in making, all of the decisions, we lose the opportunity to develop our team into independent, thinking, confident and responsible employees. That's not to say that we want to let our employees run rampant, allowing them to make bad decisions for lack of our involvement, but we lose the opportunity for that learning or training experience for them. I'm not suggesting that, as managers and team leaders, we abdicate our responsibilities to maintain control of the decision-making process, rather that we approach our responsibilities in a different way.

Best Management Practices

Those words on the sign outside my office were a simple reminder of one of my key management practices. I encouraged my staff to bring their monkeys into my office. But this philosophy prevented them from leaving these monkeys with me. I was not their zookeeper, and they had to take their monkeys back out with them! When they brought their

problems in, they knew that I also expected them to have thought the problems through and come in with at least three possible solutions to solve or resolve their problems. Once they explained exactly what their monkeys were, we'd discuss their suggested options, weighing the pros and cons of each. I'd ask probing questions as they presented their potential fixes to make sure they had thought of all variables and possibilities. As we worked our way through the options, they'd often reach their own conclusions and come up with their own solution to the issues. In most instances, they already knew the right answers but just needed validation of their decisions. If none of their options were viable, then we'd come up with a few more that were.

I used this process as a learning moment and an opportunity for personal development, and it not only built up their decision-

making confidence, it also built a solid thought-process foundation that they could use to make decisions when faced with new monkeys. Another major benefit to this process is that the employee owned the decisions, and with ownership comes commitment for the results.

Yes, there were some occasions when someone needed to leave a monkey to my care because it was a problem that really belonged to me or was of more complexity than they could reasonably handle, so I temporarily agreed to become the zookeeper. But after time and as they gained experience, this became a less frequent necessity. And yes, initially this process took more time than just making the decision myself and having them implement it, but as my team's decision-making ability and confidence improved, they handled most of the routine decisions themselves because they

already had the thought-process skills developed.

By following this philosophy, as a leader I now had more time to focus on the strategic and the most critical areas that needed my involvement. And my team had more ownership for their decisions, were more committed to projects and, ultimately, were more productive; they had the authority and the confidence to make considered decisions — decisions that weren't second-guessed.

While deep down I'm an animal lover, the regular care and feeding of a room full of monkeys is not something that is appealing to me; I'd much rather watch them from afar. My office was no longer a zoo...maybe yours doesn't need to be either... 🐒

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