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**Employees: Your #1 Asset**

Although there is a lack of a robust recovery, companies are emerging from the recession. We are in a “new normal” business environment. Gone are the days of easy sales (in essence, what could be easier than answering the phone?). Gone are the days of relatively easy profitability. Instead, it will require more expertise and creativity to thrive in the “new normal”. Much to my excitement, substance has again triumphed over form! Pragmatic is back in style.

Succeeding in today's business environment will require a well-thought out and fundamentally different strategy than it's been in many years. What are the keys to success for 2011? As always, understanding your customers is bedrock. Without customers, there is no business. Understanding your company's strengths and unique advantages is another key. Who is best equipped to understand and leverage these advantages? Your employees. Adding these two together, my question is as follows: Have you ever seen a company with unhappy employees with happy customers? Me either. As my HR mentor used to say, “The ‘right’ employees are your #1 asset”.

I could discuss this topic for days; however, I'm sure no one would read a 500 page newsletter, and so I thought we'd address a few keys to success with employees. 1) Find your stars. 2) Focus on your stars. 3) Be an effective leader.

1. **Find your stars:** Your star employees will make the difference between surviving through 2011 and THRIVING during 2011. Thus, you must begin by identifying them. Many times, these employees are overlooked – heads down, delivering results, leading projects etc.

Since they aren't typically focused on politics, they are likely to be under the radar. And, worse, since they are focused on delivering results, they are likely to bring up uncomfortable topics and ask for tough decisions. Thus, they might not be considered a star - in my experience, leaders tend to think stars are those who are liked, agreeable and hard-working (in terms of hours, not necessarily productivity). In times of easy growth and profitability, it won't mean the difference between profit and loss; however, it will now.

Look for those leaders and employees who consistently deliver results. You'll have to look hard, as they might not have time to promote their results since they are focused on ensuring they occur. Who is not complaining? Typically, when employees complain, we immediately wonder about the person being complained about. Why? The deviation from standard is the person complaining. It's fascinating how we can chase our tails without considering the facts. Look for informal leaders. If someone has an issue (not a complaint), who do they go to for help?

2. **Focus on your stars:** I cannot tell you how often companies make the HUGE mistake of ignoring their star employees. What could be easier to deliver your growth & profitability numbers than leveraging already-existing assets? Why must leaders jump to the conclusion that they can solve “all the company issues” by replacing star leaders and employees? Sound ridiculous? Absolutely; however, it occurs every day. And why do they treat the

leaders and employees delivering results poorly? In my experience, it's because the pragmatic approach to management is uncomfortable.

First, it hasn't been the typical approach for many years, and so it's understandable that there is confusion. And, beyond that, it requires hard work, commitment and integrity. Unfortunately, there are no short cuts. For example, instead of focusing on understanding roadblocks, emphasizing results and being an example, isn't it easier to say "we need to replace Sally, and that will solve our problem". After all, is it more comfortable to want to spend time in meetings with those who will agree with everything you say and appear supportive than those who push back and bring up potential roadblocks?

Those companies who THRIVE during 2011 will be those who not only identify their stars but also focus on them. Find out what they think. Ask for their ideas. Promote them. Appreciate them. Explain how their value contributes to the company's success. Invest in them. The bottom line: Treat them like your #1 asset.

3. **Be an effective leader:** Last but not least, star leaders and employees crave effective leadership. I could write another 500 pages on effective leadership; however, a few musts include: 1) Establish goals and discuss. Both easy goals and unrealistic goals are not only ineffective but are also a de-motivator. Goal setting isn't simple but its core to success. 2) Provide support, tools and appreciation on an ongoing basis. The hard work begins. These cannot be empty promises with your star employees. You will work harder than ever before to succeed. 3) Continually work together to find opportunities and evolve in a way to ensure success.

My passion surrounds delivering bottom line results with people. Not only does it not require vast cash and capital resources but people will be your single best vehicle to thriving in 2011.

### **Lisa's Tips: Year-End Planning**

1. Tax planning – have you thought about whether there is anything you can do proactively while still in 2010?
2. Projects – which projects will make a difference if they are completed in 2010? Can you increase focus? Divert resources from other projects? Take time to consider how to overcome roadblocks?
3. Holiday preparation – anything you can do to ensure the business will run smoothly during the holidays?
4. Thank you – what better time to take a step back and remember to say thank you.
5. Season of giving – instead of thinking about what you'll receive or want, spend that time thinking of how you can make a difference for your employees, peers, managers, families, friends etc.

### **Recommended Reading**

"[Best-Laid Plans](#)" by Alan Weiss – an excellent book on strategy. This book focuses on turning strategy into action throughout your organization. Not only pragmatic but also contains innovative ideas.

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