



Is Your House Divided?

by Daniel H. Chinitz

John is one of the best salespeople in your showroom. He recognizes that sales drive the business and he consistently writes profitable orders. He knows which lines are relatively problem-free and deliver the most profit dollars so these are the ones he encourages his clients to buy. He has a good teamwork attitude and helps others in the showroom with their work. It's a situation where everyone is winning!

Of course you are worried that John will one day leave you. He could go to a competing showroom; the competition is always trying to lure away good help. Or, worse yet, he might open up his own business. So you practice some damage control. You let others know that he is good but without your guidance, he wouldn't really make it. When you are having a friendly conversation with one of your Manufacturer Reps who comments about what a good job John is doing, you agree but add that John has a lot of issues, perhaps mentioning one or two, whether real or not. People will believe anything if it is said with conviction.

You further keep John in his place by offering little training. He knows enough to do his job well and you don't need to inflate his ego. When he offers any suggestions, you smile and toss that idea in the round file. The last thing you need is for everyone in the place to see John's ideas being used! After all, you are in charge, not John.

So how do you think John sees this situation? Do you think he won't ever find out what you are saying behind his back? Or discover that his ideas always wind up in the trash? When he does, he might start to wonder what his future is with you and begin to actively look for a better deal. The odds are pretty good that some of your local competitors might have already mentioned to John that they would be interested in talking if he ever decides to look around. Or John might really start thinking about opening his own place.

He will certainly share his feelings with some of the other folks who work with him. What will the consequences be for your business when everyone starts to analyze this situation? After all, if you are discussing John, the best salesperson in the showroom, with outsiders, they will naturally wonder what you are thinking or saying about them. Plus people often embellish what they hear so if you talk about someone once, you are now talking about them on a regular basis.

Once this kind of thinking begins, it snowballs into everyone digging up every complaint about you that ever crossed their brainwaves. This kind of talk can easily become quite pervasive in your organization with everyone quickly getting in on the act. And very little good can come of it. President Lincoln knew a thing or two about divided houses and how well they stand. Perhaps this might apply to your organization.

So what do you do about it? How about taking a good, hard look at yourself and your management style? Stop the civil war before some really serious shots are fired. Here are four steps to consider to get started on creating a better showroom atmosphere:

Step one: Take a hard look at your management style. Is it doing more for your ego or your bottom line? Consider getting your staff more involved with decisions that will directly affect them. Do they wish you would display something you don't? Find out why. Ask questions.

Step two: Work on yourself. As Don Miguel Ruiz discusses in his masterful book *The Four Agreements*, "Be impeccable with your word. Speak with integrity." And, equally important, "Avoid using the word to speak against yourself or to gossip about others." So instead of telling people outside your organization how someone is performing, tell the person who needs the improvement what you are thinking. Perhaps there is something you are doing, or not doing, that can help them become more successful at their job. But you won't ever know if you don't ask and encourage this type of open dialogue. You might surprise yourself with how much more your staff has to offer.

Step three: Work with your staff. Recognize the benefit of having more people on your team thinking like an owner. Share information with them to help them see the big picture. Do they understand all the costs involved with their requests? How can they if you keep them in the dark and refuse to share information that could help them grow? Pick one overhead item you pay monthly and show it to them. Do they even know it exists? Take workman's compensation insurance, for example. Once you show them the invoice, they might get a better understanding of why you don't want material left on the steps where someone can trip on it! Not to mention the amount of profit dollars that goes towards paying just this one invoice every month.

Step four: Speak to your people individually and as a group. Create an atmosphere of openness and cooperation. Insist that they stop talking behind anyone's back and step up to the plate with you. Incorporate some intervention strategies in your meetings that foster this environment of true teamwork and sharing of ideas. Start by admitting that you have been guilty of this in the past and are determined to lead the way by starting with improving yourself. Your people will truly appreciate working in this new environment of honesty and appreciation.

And be consistent! Your staff will naturally be a little dubious at first. We have all experienced friends and family who have announced that they are now "changing" something in their lives only to fall back into the old ways sooner than later. They certainly meant well but new habits are hard to develop and even harder to maintain. You have to work at it to make these changes an integral part of your life. But once you demonstrate to your staff that you mean what you say, they will be more inclined to join you. People want to work for people who seek out their opinions and show respect for their ideas.

The proverbial wise man once said “attitude is everything.” Well, it starts at the top. And once John picks up on it, your house just might stand more profitably.

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