

Million Dollar Plan of Action

By Danny Cox

How do I increase productivity? How do I build morale? How do I achieve more with a downsized team? How do I manage change? These questions highlight the common problems that I'm finding in organizations with which I've been working.

There is an answer to these critical questions. It's a leadership system that any manager can use in coaching his or her team. It's something I developed when my back was against the wall.

The corporation that I worked for appointed me manager of their top office out of 36 offices. Three months later we plummeted to number 36. My boss told me he was looking for my replacement. I had to act fast so I took two days off to do some *very* motivated creative thinking.

The system's birth began during that time by me drawing a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On the left side I drew a symbol representing me, the manager. On the right side I drew circles in the same number as there were people in the office. Inside each circle I put a name of one of the people in the office.

This became a situation analysis. I was on one "side of the fence" and the people I was supposed to be managing were on the other side. Not a healthy situation when the "coach" isn't even on the team!

Everyone needs to be on the same side but could that be accomplished by demands or threats? No. Could it be accomplished by me going over to their side and try being a "buddy" to each of them? No, that's not what leadership is, either.

It was apparent that I had to bring them over to my side one at a time by priority. This priority was not based on production, lest professional jealousy rear its ugly head. I based it on who was most respected by the other team members (which is generally *not* the super star).

I named the transition process, The Million-Dollar Plan of Action. First it involved writing a column entitled "Weaknesses" of each individual person. These were not things that I wanted to change in each person but only things to be acutely aware of, in other words a "map through the mine field."

The second column was labeled "Strengths." I found it a difficult column to construct because of looking for so long at each person's weaknesses. But as the list grew I became more enthusiastic about each person's potential. The strength column was as long if not longer than that of weaknesses.

The third and final column was called "Strategy." This became my personal plan for working with people to help develop more of their potential. I built the plan around being *aware* of each team member's weaknesses but communicating with his or her individual strengths. In other words, how a particular strength could be used in some facet of the job.

Up until that time I had been unaware of their strengths but I had been communicating with their weaknesses. It's a common problem for both managers and parents. If you often hear yourself say, "If I were you, I..." then you're guilty. No one has ever heard the end of that sentence because they silently shout back in their minds, "You're not me!" They feel that you're comparing your strengths to their weaknesses. It's a futile effort to transplant the manager's strengths into the other person and there has *never* been a successful operation. Period.

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What works extremely well, instead, is to say to the person, "With your strengths, I feel the best way to handle the situation you're involved in would be to..." Then describe how it can be used in this circumstance. You'll have a very attentive audience. It says to this person that you have studied his or her strengths, listened to the situation in which they're involved and presented them with ideas on how to use their personal strengths successfully. It's great coaching at its very best.

Using this system with all of your team members consistently brings strong synergy. Each person sees not only personal growth but also the same in others. Production and morale increase along with energy and enthusiasm becoming almost tangible. When you have helped them grow and develop they pay you off with respect. At that moment you are no longer the manager but the leader.

This system brings results very quickly. In my own case, with my boss out looking for my replacement and my office number 36 out of 36, I applied it. Within 120 days we were back at number one. We didn't stop there. Continuing to coach their strengths, we broke office, company and industry records.

Later, I was promoted to district manager with ten office managers and assistant managers. After teaching the system to them we experienced dramatic results. In the next five and a half years, which included two recession years, the production went through the roof with an 800% increase; morale soared and turnover dropped to near zero. That was the "the proof of the pudding."

Keep in mind that this same concept can be used to manage change. You may have built a strong high performance team but now they have to adapt to some new product or some new way of doing business. As far as the change is concerned, picture all of your team on "the other side of the fence." Then go to the most respected person of the group and help him or her become comfortable with the change. Then on to the second most respected and so on. You'll find that when you have the top third (the most respected third) on your side the rest will follow.

Begin your own system by writing at the top of a blank piece of paper the name of the most respected team member. Divide the sheet into three columns marked Weaknesses, Strengths and Strategy. As you fill in the weakness column, expect severe writer's cramp. This is normal. The strengths in the next column come slowly at first but with concentration on the person, you'll pick up speed and enthusiasm for the person's potential. The strategy column becomes your personal coaching plan for this person. The plan is based on being aware of the person's weaknesses but communicating with their strengths. Do this same thing with each of the team members.

A word of caution. This list of weaknesses and strengths is never shown to them or left on your desk where it might be seen.

Remember that good leadership builds a team that out performs market conditions no matter where they are, high or low.

Excerpted from Danny's book, *Leadership When the Heat's On*, 2nd Edition

Visit Danny's web site at www.DannyCox.com