Of all the tools necessary to manage a casino operation effectively, none is more important than the ability to build consensus throughout the organization. Building consensus can be performed only after careful observation, dedicated practice and much trial and error. But when perfected, the ability to build consensus can turn “a vision of success” into a working reality. What exactly, then, is consensus building in an organizational setting? The dictionary provides us with a good starting point: “Consensus takes place when there is general or widespread agreement among all the members of a group.” But now, the strategic question becomes, agreement about what? And the question which naturally follows from this is, how do we go about it? It is the answer to this second question which makes consensus building so challenging, because habits and opinions are hard to change.

However, before we can begin to discuss consensus building, it’s important to understand why managers must take time to learn how to do it. Some years ago, when today’s middle aged managers were in their early teens, the shape of business organizations was very different. Roles and responsibilities were much more rigid and hierarchical. There were not many high tech jobs, and computers, what few that existed, were the size of Mack trucks. Also, job classifications were broken down into more simplified categories, such as skilled and unskilled. Much of the work force during this time were involved in either direct manufacturing or agriculture.

In those days, management was more universally authoritarian. Most bosses managed by telling people to work faster, or, at times, by belittling them for petty mistakes or violations of work procedures. This was the era of “the gun to the head” approach to management. In such a setting there wasn’t much need to ask for employee buy-in. You either performed in the prescribed manner or you were out.

The main point here is that the worker functioned almost exclusively as a gear in a giant machine, without much choice or decision making capabilities. Let’s now fast forward to the present. Today, most manufacturing jobs are largely automated. Workers, in almost all areas, must have at least some basic computer knowledge. Further, our current economy is now based on service, communication and information. In other words, in a single generation, we have seen a total shift in our product focus. This shift has dramatically altered almost every aspect of the way business is conducted.

Yet in many ways, our techniques of managing people have not kept pace with our technological advancements. The “my way or the highway” hypothesis still rules in many business settings. But there are notable exceptions. It’s clear that those businesses, including many of our most profitable casinos, that are able to grasp the new, more flexible roles of employees, are far more successful, than those that don’t. It’s now a documented fact that operations which focus upon creating an empowered work force, ones which partner internally in response to a commonly shared vision, are those that can best their nearest competitors by a wide margin, both in terms of growth potential and profitability.

And this is where consensus building plays a commanding role. Because it is through consensus building that employees can unite to function in strategic ways in order to accomplish a host of important things, like delivering great guest service, solving difficult problems, addressing challenging issues, carrying out complex tasks, developing solid internal communication, et. al. The most effective form of consensus building starts with the creation of a shared vision. In other words, a working concept of what the operation wants to look like, internally and in relation to its guests.

The creation of a shared vision is best carried out through continuous facilitated dialogue with employees at all levels. Accordingly, time must be spent within various operations which is devoted solely to detailing descriptions of how both employees and managers want their area to look. In casino operations, there are many different service areas - table games, slots, valet, security services, food and beverages operations, and so on. Each one of these areas needs to develop a “mini-vision” consisting of desirable behaviors and attitudes which they wish to exhibit amongst themselves and with guests.

There is a model for casinos to use for this type of consensus building. It’s called FAST TRACK. Simply speaking, each letter in the word FAST stands for a key performance area: “F” represents friendliness, “A” refers to accountability, “S” equals service excellence and “T” relates to teamwork. Managers and staff can use this model as a convenient way to shape their discussions for developing a shared vision.

For example, what kinds of behaviors and attitudes are required for a valet person to exhibit teamwork or service excellence? Whatever answer is agreed upon becomes a part of the overall shared vision of the valet operation. Bear in mind that each service area will require its own unique set of behaviors and attitudes for the simple reason that each job type...
requires a different set of skills and responsibilities. In other words, a blackjack dealer will generally have much more time to exhibit friendliness to a guest than say a person in the cage, who must be friendly, yet accurate and quick in handling a cash transaction. Therefore, exhibiting friendliness will have a different “look” for a dealer than for a cage person.

Armed with a set of “FAST TRACK” behaviors and attitudes, the manager now has a firm foundation for shaping and structuring operations in a more precise way. In this framework, the act of management becomes one of fostering agreement and influencing people to buy in to the attitudes and behaviors that the employees themselves have helped to create.

Rather than manage according to a vague set of rules and regulations, the consensus oriented manager now has a concrete platform to enlist agreement and buy-in. The incorporation of this consensus building model also allows for much clearer interpretations of what constitutes outstanding performances, which, in turn, makes the process of rewarding and recognizing people more tangible and objective. Concurrently, this consensus model also makes it a lot easier to identify performances which are not up to the standards set by the operational group as a whole.

While a consensus building management approach is more challenging to put in place, the payoff is more than apparent: more stability in the work force, lower turnover, improved morale, retention of valued employees, enhanced guest satisfaction, increased profitability, and a greater competitive advantage in hiring the best people available. Casinos which are experiencing difficulties in achieving any of the above outcomes would be well advised to take a closer look at implementing a consensus type model for managing its employees. ♦

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