

# Create a Volunteer Mindset, Improve Your Bottom Line and Inspire Your People

## *The 6 Critical Things You Need to Work On*

“The most financially successful businesses do better than the rest on virtually every aspect of employee attitudes, and those that do best on employee attitudes are measurably more profitable. What is even more powerful...it is attitudes that drive financial results, and not (predominantly) the other way round.”

David H. Maister  
*Practice What You Preach*

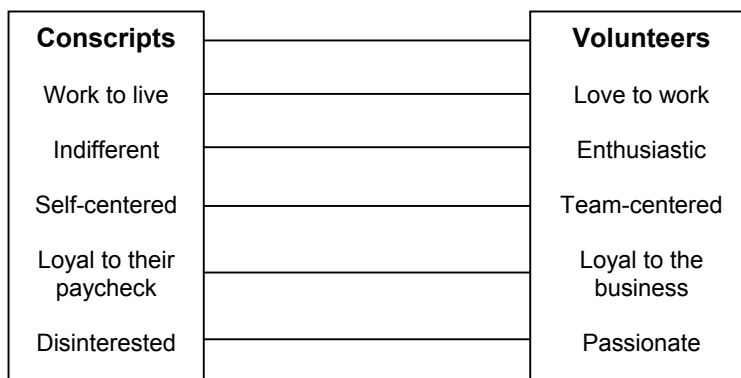
Some people live to work. Others work to live. In most businesses you’ll find people at both ends of this scale. Somewhere in between lie team members who are an ideal blend of being engaged, committed, enthusiastic and generous team contributors who are neither obsessive workaholics nor indifferent slugs.

These people have, what Fred Hilmer describes as, a volunteer mindset.

What would it mean to you and your bottom line, if your team had a volunteer mindset?

They are people who love to come to work. When they get there they love to contribute positively to the workplace environment. They relish the opportunity to help their co-workers and they delight in celebrating the wins that the business experiences. They are loyal to a tee and always unselfishly come up with ideas to better achieve the vision of the business.

When you take a high level view of the people in your organization, where do you feel your team fits on the continuum shown below?



People with a volunteer mindset are probably the kind of people you would like to fill your organization with and keep for life. What would it mean to you and your bottom line, if your team had a volunteer mindset?

Too many people in business believe that getting and keeping great team members is a matter of luck, and that good people are few and far between. It isn't about luck. It's about creating the circumstances that allow ordinary people to excel. It's about the way people are led and managed, and that's about creating an environment that encourages people to assume a volunteer mindset.

Many years ago Abraham Maslow<sup>1</sup> noted that as soon as a person's basic needs have been met (food, shelter, money, safety etc.) others would take their place, such as the need for social interaction, esteem, and self-actualization (realizing individual potential, peer approval, winning and achieving).

Typically, as people move further up an organization their basic fulfillment needs change. For example, lower level team members usually want a job and a reasonable degree of structure; whereas people at higher levels value personal growth and opportunity to progress.

While being sensitive to people's differing needs is critically important and one of the traits of great leadership and management, it is not in itself sufficient to create a pervading volunteer mindset.

The conditions that must be in place are reflected in the diagram to the right.

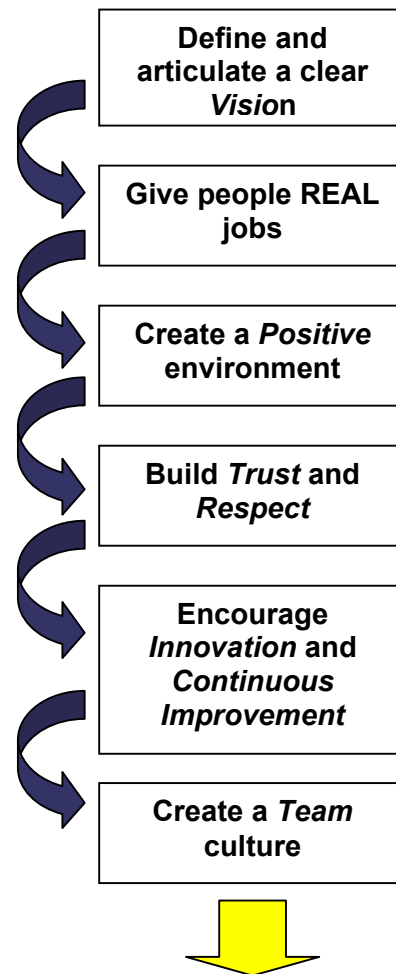
A clear **Vision** is needed to give people a sense of purpose and direction. This is what enables them to have **Real** jobs, meaning that they understand how what they do contributes to the success of the business.

For people to want to contribute, there must be a **Positive** environment where the focus is on things that are going right rather than things that are going wrong.

A positive environment is impossible to achieve without a lot of **Trust and Respect**,

which in turn is a necessary condition for **Innovation** and **Continuous Improvement** to occur.

Great ideas for improvement emerge from the collective wisdom of many people and will go nowhere unless and until implemented, so a **Team** culture must prevail for outstanding results to be achieved.



## A Team with a Volunteer Mindset

We'll talk about each of the 6 conditions for creating a volunteer mindset in the next section.

## Define a Clear Vision and Passionately Articulate It

In very simple terms, the vision of a business describes what the business does and what it wants to look like when it's finally done. One way to think about this is to complete the following exercise:

The purpose for our existence as a business is \_\_\_[fill in what the business does]\_\_\_ which will be valued by customers because \_\_\_[fill in the reasons customers will support the business]\_\_\_.

It will be a business that attracts and retains loyal and talented team members because \_\_\_[fill in why people will want to work there] \_\_\_ and we will out-perform our competitors because \_\_\_[fill in how and why the business will be better] \_\_\_.

Not only does a clearly articulated vision act as a beacon for you and your team to work towards, it also sets a benchmark against which you choose to play. You set the bar so to speak. Any organization that wants to be the best in its class must stretch itself beyond what it might have thought possible. It is also the foundation for establishing the basis for giving your team a sense of winning – the thing that Jack Stack calls “the universal desire to win.” (p. 3)

How can anyone get excited about achieving 10% growth over last year? Or a leader who says, “Things are pretty tough at the moment so we need to knuckle down and work hard” and then, even worse, adds “If you don't do that some of you will be let go”?

For suggestions on how to define a clear vision and articulate it passionately, complete Business Workout #1: Define a Clear Vision and Give Your People a Driving Purpose.

### Give People Real Jobs

People want to feel that what they do adds value to the organization and that they are

considered to be an integral part of the winning team. They want to believe that what they do contributes in a meaningful way to the company's success. In short, they want to have a REAL job.

For example, a person working as a receptionist does so much more than simply answer phones and sort the mail. That job is the interface between customers and the business. The receptionist is responsible for ensuring that the first and last experience a customer has with the business is a pleasurable one. In a very real sense this person is pivotal to the success of the entire organization. Yet, s/he is probably the lowest paid, the least trained and considered to be the most dispensable.

When people understand that they are a critical link in the overall value creation process of the business, they are far more likely to understand how their performance can positively impact the outcome. In other words, their job has context and purpose.

Every job performed by people is a real job. If that is not the case, it is redundant. The key is simply to make sure that everyone in every position knows exactly how his or her role contributes to the big picture. This again, is a communication issue that links directly with the concept of having a clearly articulated driving purpose, and a trusting and inclusive environment.

Learn how to ensure your people feel that they have real jobs in your business – complete the Business Workout #2: Give People Real Jobs.

### Create a Positive Environment

Winners are grinners so the saying goes.

Tom Peters and Bob Waterman, authors of *In Search of Excellence*, observed that excellent companies have managers who spend a good deal of their time “wandering around looking for things people are doing right rather than things they're doing wrong.”

Management should have less to do with fixing problems than with creating an environment where celebrating wins has obvious priority.

One of the paradoxes of business is that the very act of focusing on problems is what causes them in the first place.

Problem-seeking managers are usually micro-managers. They see their purpose in life as fixing things and being the center of attention. This may cater to their ego and sense of value but it does little for the people who have to work for them (note the intentional use of the word *for* rather than *with*). They are also workflow bottlenecks that seriously impact productivity.

Such managers do not trust the judgment of their team and in fact don't encourage them to make judgments because in their mind, they will inevitably be wrong. They are poor delegators, and when they do delegate they give responsibility but no real authority. When things go right they are quick to claim credit but when things go wrong they are just as quick to point fingers.

Encouraging innovation and experimentation is necessary to create a team of people with a volunteer mindset. This can't be done if people do not have permission to fail.

As long as failure is seen as a learning process it is always positive and can just as easily be celebrated as an obvious success.

Think of a parent and his or her child learning to walk. The first tentative steps usually end in a fall. Does the parent respond to the child with spontaneous clapping and encouragement or does s/he utter words like "You fool, can't you even walk, everyone can walk, when I was your age I was walking everywhere. Get out of the way and let me show you how to do it. See how clever I am, now you go and do it like that"?

The critical players in creating a positive environment are the people you appoint to management positions. It is said that a fish stinks from the head down, and this most certainly applies in a business organization. A simple credo that makes a lot of sense is: Look after your team and they'll take good care of your customers, look after your managers and they'll take good care of your team.

Managers who lack self-confidence are intimidated when faced by competent people. Their command and control style instinctively

causes them to hire (and promote) people who are weaker than they are and of similar ilk. They surround themselves with power coalitions of yes-men and women. This causes a negative spiral to set in as each cohort of managers hires someone weaker. To paraphrase advertising guru David Ogilvy: In these circumstances, instead of building an organization of giants, you end up with an organization of dwarfs. Ogilvy felt so strongly about this that he made a practice of giving his new management hires a set of Russian dolls to remind them of the importance of hiring 'up'.

Find out how you can create a positive approach in your business by completing Business Workout #3: Create a Positive Environment In Your Business.

### Build Trust and Respect

Without trust there can be no respect. Without either trust or respect an organization simply goes through the motions of being a business where internal politics, infighting and finger pointing prevail.

A trusting environment is an absolutely necessary condition for creativity, innovation and an energized workforce, which, in turn, is an absolutely necessary condition for all of the other ideas outlined in this article to work.

Trust implies integrity, which is about honesty, fairness and consistency. It is a condition that must permeate the entire fabric of an organization's culture and as such it is the primary responsibility of leadership at all levels. It can't be created with passionate speeches but will be reflected in overt behaviors. Team members shouldn't be able to hear your words because your actions speak too loudly.

When people fear retribution for thinking outside of the box, taking a step off the path of routine or voicing an opinion, they feel like drones putting pegs in holes doing only what they've been told to do, and nothing more. Their opinion is not valued and their self-respect is undermined. This is not the stuff that makes for a great organization.

What follows is a sad example of a poorly led business as reflected by this statement, taken from an employee feedback form.

*“I felt cornered into ‘getting people in trouble’ when something went wrong. If I felt that the person responsible would be coached on how to do it better, fairly warned to get things right or dealt with constructively I would feel more inclined to reveal where the break in the chain was. The way the situation is now I feel stressed that someone will be publicly humiliated, privately belittled and completely disrespected by the head of our company. Because of this, I am less likely to take a chance on something possibly great for the company because of the risk that it might fail. While I have thick skin and can deal with criticism, I do not want to be responsible for getting someone else belittled or fired. It prevents me from being 100 percent honest. I also feel that the CEO classifies team members as being either competent or incompetent and there is very little room to change that assessment or allow for the fact that people have some strengths and some weaknesses. In this environment, I have witnessed people trying to catch the CEO’s ear to belittle or dismiss the abilities of others in order to save their own behind or make themselves look good in his eyes. This is a behavior that they have learned from the CEO himself.”*

This person has lost all motivation to try and improve the company and is unwilling to identify challenges or opportunities for fear of failing and/or getting someone fired or publicly humiliated. There is no accountability, no trust and no willingness to participate. Needless to say, this particular business experienced a 70% turnover of team members and a huge turnaround in profitability in just one year.

A fundamental requirement for creating a trusting environment is open communication, and a useful place to start is sharing with your team members the company’s financial targets and results. To some people that is an outrageous suggestion. “It’s none of their business” is a common response.

But it *is* their business *if* you want them to accept ownership for the results of the work they do. Think of it this way, how many people would want to play a sport where they were not permitted to know the score during or even after the game has been played?

**Volunteers ‘own’ the results and will bust their gut to achieve the company’s targets. Conscripts couldn’t care less as long as they get paid.**

If you want support for the idea of sharing financial data, read *The Great Game of Business* by Jack Stack<sup>3</sup>. He took the Springfield Remanufacturing Corporation that was losing \$60,000 to a profit of \$2.7 million in four years. He acquired the business as a management buy-out in 1983 when it was struggling to survive. By 1991 it was doing \$70 million and employed 650 people compared to the 119 who were employed at the time he took over.

His secret:

“We turn business into a game that everybody in the company can play. It’s fun but it’s more: it’s a way of tapping into the universal desire to win, of making that desire a powerful competitive force.” (p3)

And he makes a hugely important point when talking about what his company does:

“Remanufacturing engines is incidental to what we do. Our real business is education. We teach people about business. We give them the knowledge that allows them to go out and play the game.” (p4)

What an interesting perspective on business: that it’s a game, that it can be taught, that it can be fun, that people have a universal desire to be winners and that this can be turned into a sustainable competitive advantage.

The interesting thing about communicating information is that without it, team members simply can’t take responsibility. With it, they can’t avoid taking responsibility. If you choose not to share information with the team about the company and its performance, it is

natural that they'll quickly come to the conclusion that you do not trust them.

People have a basic need to feel in on things and they understand better what makes the business succeed when they're well informed. People are more motivated to do the right things when they're involved in the ultimate success of the business. Given that, it makes all the sense in the world for you to be the source of information rather than allow the inevitable grapevine to spread its (unreliable) tentacles throughout the business.

To assess your communication effectiveness, complete Business Workout #4: Build Trust and Respect in Your Business.

### Encourage Innovation and Continuous Improvement

While systems, processes and procedures are an important part of an efficient business, it's equally important that they do not stifle innovation and prevent your business from reaching its full potential.

In most industries that have been around for any length of time, the way things are done is pretty well settled. People tend not to challenge them because "that's always been how we do it." Consequently, most businesses tend to have about the same level of efficiency, which is quite good. Those that don't achieve the minimum acceptable industry standard simply fail while others take rank with the mediocrity and a select few emerge as clear leaders – these are the great companies.

Jim Collins elegantly summarizes one of the paradoxes of business when he says, "Good is the enemy of great!" We'll dig into that in another article, but for now what lies at the heart of the paradox is that "good" breeds complacency.

Outstanding businesses are the ones that constantly search for and implement new ways of doing things. When we talk of innovation, we are not just talking about product or service innovation. We're also talking about the way the organization does what it does – process innovation. Outstanding businesses are the

ones that have the courage to let their people "find a better way every day" to use Jack Welch's words. (p187)

Almost without exception, management will NOT be the richest source of new ideas and better ways of doing things. People on the front line who are customer facing or who are actually doing the things the business does are the richest sources of new ideas.

The next richest sources of new ideas are your customers. When you involve your customers in the innovation process you not only come up with some great new ideas that your customers have already indicated they would value, you also build fiercely loyal advocates.

You need to create an environment in which your people feel free to offer suggestions and ideas knowing that those suggestions will be received with an open mind, acknowledged, considered, and either implemented or responded to with a plausible explanation as to why not, if they can't be implemented.

We are not suggesting that you incite your team to tear off like whirling dervishes and start re-inventing everything you do. There have to be checks and controls in place. To a large extent this will automatically happen when you have a trusting environment and people have an opportunity to contribute without fear of retribution or humiliation.

When you're building this environment, ensure your team members understand that not all ideas will get out of the starting blocks, but that shouldn't deter them from making recommendations for ways to do things better.

Refer to Business Workout #5: Encourage Innovation and Continuous Experimentation to see how you can foster experiments and innovation in your organization.

### Create a Team Culture

The acronym T.E.A.M. (together everyone achieves more) has become a cliché but it still conveys a powerful common-sense message. Humans have a herd mentality and a natural inclination to want to be part of a group – especially a group of winners. There are few things more rewarding in life than the pursuit

of a challenging goal as part of a team and being able to say on its accomplishment: Yes. We did it!

Creating an environment that encourages people to work together towards a common goal is the final condition to create a volunteer mindset. When you have networks of teams, a sense of community and responsibility to that community is fostered. Equally important, is the fact that the collective wisdom of a group of people is far greater than the sum of their individual abilities. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to note that companies that are in the ordinary category have very poor team spirit and are built along a silo model.

In his relentless pursuit of excellence, Jack Welch, Chairman and CEO of General Electric and arguably one of the best in the world, became obsessed with building what he described as a boundary-less organization in late 1989.

His concept of boundary-less was an all encompassing idea of demolishing boundaries between businesses within GE (e.g. cross-functional and cross-business teams to solve problems and improve efficiencies), between GE and its suppliers and customers (e.g. integrating customers and suppliers into the manufacturing and distribution processes), between functional departments within the company and importantly, between the people who came up with ideas and those who implemented them. In his words, "It would put the team ahead of individual ego...and leaders would be encouraged to share the credit for ideas with their teams rather than take full credit themselves." (p186-7)

Championing and rewarding people who come up with great ideas is only half of the picture. An idea is just an idea until it's implemented. Then it becomes a result, and for that to happen there must be a team at work.

Asking team members to contribute to planning heightens their level of motivation and sense of value. Oftentimes, the simple act of holding regular team meetings, celebrations and milestones will go a long way towards raising team spirits.

Find out how to foster and motivate teams within your own business by completing Business Workout #6: Create a TEAM Culture in Your Business.

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## Support Resources

Our firm is a member of the Principa Alliance, a global network of business growth consultants who are focused on helping small to mid sized business owners build better businesses.

We can help show you how to motivate and keep the best and brightest employees

Learn more about we can help you grow your business profits by calling us today.