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# 5 Ways to Ensure Mediocrity in Your Organization

by Liz Ryan  
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The recession is no excuse for ignoring, misusing, or demeaning talent. But hey, if that's what you really want to do, follow these suggestions.

The last time I checked, the U.S. led the world in productivity per employee. That's the good news. The bad news is that much, if not all, of that boost in productivity has come on the backs of workers, especially salaried types viewed by too many management teams as infinitely elastic resources. As one management consultant told me: "The average company takes better care of its copiers than it does its talent."

Many chief executives use the tough competitive environment as a handy excuse to put off salary increases, tighten the screws on performance, and generally drop any pretense of creating a human-centered workplace. But the tough-economy picture has two sides. Only those companies that make the effort to keep their employees productive by treating them decently can expect to see continued productivity gains. Much of the workforce has tuned out, waiting for a more welcoming job market to make career moves. Those organizations that haven't wavered on their commitments to flexibility, recognition of talent, and transparent leadership will keep A-list players on board as the job market improves. Their competitors may be wishing they'd paid a little more attention to employee TLC as employees start peeling off for greener pastures.

Here are five of the most insulting leadership practices, the ones that virtually guarantee a business will end up with the most self-esteem challenged, optionless team members when the dust settles.

1. If you desire a mediocre workforce, make sure your employees know you don't trust them.

Nothing spells "You're dirt to us" like a corporate culture that screams, "We don't trust you as far as we can throw you." I refer to company policies that require employees to clock in and out for lunch or software that tracks every keystroke and change of URL in case a molecule of nonwork-related activity squeaks into the workday. When employees know they're not trusted, they become experts at "presenteeism"—the physical appearance of working, without anything getting done. Congratulations! Your inability to trust the very people you've selected to join your team has cost you their energy, goodwill, and great ideas.

2. If you want to drive talented people away, don't tell them when they shine.

Fear of a high-self-esteem employee is prevalent among average-grade corporate leadership teams. Look how hard it is for so many managers to say, "Hey Bob, you did a great job today." Maybe it's a fear that the bit of praise will be met with a request for a pay raise. Maybe it's the fear that acknowledging performance will somehow make the manager look weak. Whatever the reason for silence, leaders who can't say, "Thanks—good going!" can plan on bidding farewell to their most able team members in short order.

3. If you prefer a team of C-list players, keep employees in the dark.

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4. If you value docility over ingenuity, shout it from the rooftops.

I heard from a new MBA who had joined a global manufacturer. "They told me during my first week that I need a manager's signature to organize a meeting," he recalled. "They said I'm too low-level to call a meeting on my own, because unauthorized meetings of nonmanagers are against company policy." How fearful of its employees would a leadership team have to be to forbid people to gather together to solve problems? The most desirable value creators won't stick around to be treated like children. They'll hop a bus to the first employer who tells them, "We're hiring you for your talent—now go do something brilliant."

5. If you fear an empowered workforce more than you fear the competition, squash any sign of individualism.

When you go to college, you learn about Economic Man, but in the corporate workplace we see that real people don't always act rationally. Lots of individual managers and plenty of leadership teams fear nothing more than the idea that a self-directed employee might buck authority. That's equivalent to shaking the organizational power structure to its foundation, possibly a fate worse than death. Leaders who want the most docile, sheep-like employees more than the smartest and ablest ones create systems to keep the C players on board and drive the A team out the door. They do it by instituting reams of pointless rules, upbraiding people for miniscule infractions ("What? Twenty minutes late? Sure you worked here until midnight last night, but starting time is starting time.") and generally replacing trust with fear throughout their organizations. Companies that operate in fear mode will never deliver great products and services to the marketplace. Their efforts will be hamstrung by their talent-repelling management practices.

How long will it take these enterprises to figure out they're shooting themselves in the foot? It doesn't matter—you'll be long gone by then.

*Liz Ryan is an expert on the new-millennium workplace and a former Fortune 500 HR executive.*

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