

What Drives You? The Hidden Impact on your Bottom Line

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Do you have difficult employees who have not stepped up to the plate? Do you have people on your team who tend to generate or be caught up in a lot of chaos and confusion? Is it possible that you are the problem? The first step for you, as the leader, is to take a hard look at yourself. The question to ask yourself is “who are you being that has given these people permission to conduct themselves in this way”? How have you trained them to think that this behavior or productivity is appropriate?

All of us are born with a full tank of what I call our own “leadership foundation.” However, because of the circumstances of our families or our backgrounds, this foundation has “chipped away.” We have needs that have not been fully met. We let ourselves put up with situations or people who drain our energy. Over a lifetime, our tanks begin to develop small, slow leaks. These leaks result from our own unmet needs. Typically these tend to relate to things that we put up with or tolerate. We do this because we either do not admit that they are tolerations or because we don’t want to offend anyone by putting our own needs ahead of others.

The result is that we have less energy. We are not able to focus clearly. We tend to have more breakdowns and confusion in communication and in life. We make poor decisions. We tend to be easily distracted and lose our focus. We think we are being honorable and noble by putting others’ needs first, but eventually, our decisions have a far greater negative impact than if we had simply been truthful in the first place. We do all of this in a manner that is completely reactionary. We almost never, at least initially, realize the impact on our actions and decisions.

Some of us have an unmet need for acknowledgment or to get credit for our contributions. In my own case, in order to try to get my own need for credit met, I began to be overly responsible at an early age. I carried this sense of responsibility into the workplace and initially had success because I was such a workhorse and so reliable. But eventually this strategy ran out of gas. My boss would always be concerned or confused about me. It didn’t matter if my boss was male or female. It didn’t matter if I was in tax, auditing or management consulting, the pattern was always the same. I was the common denominator. Even though I was saying the right words and offering to help on additional client engagements, serve on more committees and undertake difficult projects and I appeared to be a great team player, unconsciously I was really trying to get credit. This did not leave people with a sense of partnership or connection with me. My associates did not trust me. It was as if they could sense that I was not totally honorable in my efforts- I wasn’t just trying to be a good team player – I was really trying to get my own needs met.

Many of us have a need to be recognized. This can show up in the workplace by our need to be recognized for our projects and deliverables. We then tend to over-commit and over-promise in an

effort to get the credit we think we deserve. A need for recognition can also push us to produce extraordinary results through our volunteer efforts and our community involvement. While these results benefit our communities in many valuable ways, there is a cost to us individually and to our business since we are really being driven by this unmet need.

Other common unmet needs include the need to be included or accepted, a need to always be right and a need to be validated. All of these needs relate to the need for recognition. After working as an Executive Coach and Leadership Strategist with hundreds of chief executives and their teams, I have determined that there are several basic needs that all human beings have: the need for recognition, the need to be heard and the need to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Before we can look at your team members and what their unmet needs might be, we first have to look at you as the leader. If we can fill up these holes in your own leadership foundation, you will just naturally start to attract team players who have stronger leadership foundations also.

I once worked with a CEO on the west coast who had a need to be the “go to gal”. She trained all of her employees to bring their challenges directly to her. She had an “open door” policy for her entire organization of 3,000 people. You can imagine the toll this took on her calendar, not to mention how her direct reports felt marginalized because she encouraged their people to dis-respect the organization structure. She supported with her words the processes the organization had spent time and resources developing to gather employee feedback and suggestions for organization improvements, but her actions actually sabotaged her people and all of their efforts. There was a very high cost to the organization for her behavior. Morale among her senior leaders was low so everyone’s engagement and therefore productivity was negatively affected. Even though the organization spent tremendous resources attempting to build a culture of empowerment and engagement, the CEO sabotaged the entire effort just because of her own unmet needs. The irony of unmet needs is that they are an inside job. You can’t get them met from external sources. The CEO could have had 300,000 employees filing through the office reporting their needs and ideas and it would not have been enough. She would have continued to spiral towards an explosion, either personally or professionally, if the unmet needs were not recognized, articulated and met in healthy, appropriate ways by the Chief Executive herself.

For most of us, the notion of an unmet need is not on our radar screen. We don’t even know that we have them. We certainly don’t see them driving our decisions and our choices. Yet, according to Richard D. Carlson, all human beings have some unmet needs and some corresponding strategy or “act” that we have developed to try to get the needs met regardless of the inauthenticity of the act or the high cost of the strategy.

A study was conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1986 entitled “The Balanced Program”. The purpose was to assess the gap between management and staff’s perspective about what employees need. The results, reported in Enlightened Leadership by Oakley and Krug, were surprising. The study revealed that employees’ #1 need was to be appreciated (noticed, acknowledged and accepted). Bosses incorrectly judged that to be their employees’ #8 need.

That research further indicated that employees’ #2 need was to be included (listened to, heard and involved in decisions). Bosses incorrectly judged that need to be #10. Oakley and Krug went on to

say that when employees don't get their needs met at work, morale drops. We all know that when morale decreases so does productivity, quality, customer satisfaction and a host of hard measures.

If you can give acknowledgement to your team members in appropriate ways and give them the opportunity to be really heard and involved in decisions, you will be providing great value to them. These are gifts that you can give them. When you help them get their needs met in healthy, appropriate ways, they will be healthier, more productive and more satisfied employees who will be retained by your company for many years. This will translate directly to your bottom line as increased profits.

To be a successful strategic leader you must identify your own unmet needs. Look for patterns or trends in your own life or business. Ask your close associates and loved ones what they perceive your unmet needs to be. Some people have an unmet need to always be right. Others need to be the "go-to" person in their organizations. I see many people with an unmet need to be in control. Give this some thought and consideration. After you have gotten some ideas about what your own unmet needs might be, test the waters. Look for appropriate ways to get the need met. If you have a need for recognition, ask your close associates to give you recognition when they see an opportunity to give you genuine, authentic, recognition and acknowledgement. Help others celebrate success and get their own needs met. Pretty soon they will be reciprocating.

Acknowledgment is a powerful tool and one that is often under-utilized. The difference between acknowledgment and a compliment is that acknowledgment tells the other person how what they did made a difference for you. If you give someone a compliment, it is often based on just your opinion. If you focus your acknowledgment on the facts and specifically include the difference it made for you, people get it. They can't just brush it off and say, "Oh, it was nothing". Try using acknowledgments often, especially with those who seem to have an unmet need for recognition or if you yourself have an unmet need for recognition. The interesting thing about acknowledgment is that the more you give, the more you will get.

This approach will ultimately benefit you because eventually you will receive so much acknowledgment that you will recognize that your own unmet needs have been fully met. For me, after I gave up a career as a CPA that was not in alignment with my authentic self and became a Leadership Strategist, partnering closely with Chief Executives around board and management effectiveness, I was able to finally get my unmet need for credit fully met. This did not occur solely because I was getting so much acknowledgment and credit from my clients, although that did not hurt. What eventually occurred is that I was able to acknowledge myself and give myself credit for my accomplishments. After that the need simply melted away. My decisions are now based not on what I might do to get credit but instead based on what will be best for all parties, how can I have the most impact with the least effort? How can I get the most satisfaction out of my work?

If you can examine what your own unmet needs are and do what you need to do to get them fully met, then your business decisions won't be reactionary or based on your unmet needs but will be grounded in your values, experience and solid business judgments. Your people will follow your lead. The results will be profound.