



CRITICLEYE



Saints & Sinners in Middle Management

*For a business to truly excel, the layers of management below the executive team need to be both competent and committed. **Criticleye** finds out how to ensure managers really do make the grade*

Can middle management be trusted when they smile and nod as you espouse your latest grand plan? There has to be supreme confidence that your managers will tell you honestly what they think and then relay the right messages with passion to their respective teams. Otherwise, extensive damage will be inflicted if they say one thing, do another and feign enthusiasm for your ideas.

If that is the case, they need to be weeded out fast. **Jon Moulton**, Chairman of turnaround investor Better Capital, says: “If it’s an excellent business and it’s got lousy management it could still be generating reasonable results, but if it is anything less than excellent and it’s producing poor results you can be pretty confident that management is your first place to look for blame.”

Here are five pointers to help you sift the wheat from the chaff in your business:

1 ARE THEY COMPANY ADVOCATES?

“It’s clearly very important that your middle managers are ambassadors of the business,” says **Geraint Anderson**, CEO of TT Electronics. “They are the ones in front of customers and talking to lots of the employees on a daily basis. If they don’t believe in the business and really walk the talk, then you’ve got a major issue on your hands.”

Richard Oosterom, Executive Vice President of Group Strategy & Business Development at business communications provider, Colt Technology Services, comments: “[It means] having frequent interaction with [managers] as well as their teams, watching whether they are focused on

short as well as long-term goals and serve the company’s interest and not just their own or their team’s.”

2 ATTITUDE AND ABILITY

The pressure to figure out where the real talent lies often comes to a head in a turnaround situation. For **Ian Toal**, CEO of dairy company Adams Foods, who has cut some £5 million of costs out of the business since joining in July 2011, it has been a case of being harsh but fair. “I did a lot of profiling with the individuals in terms of skill-sets, which also gives you a flavour of the people who want to be on the journey with you,” he claims.

“If you’re not the finished article and you want to be on the journey, I’m one of those people that will work to get that person where they need to be... But the people who simply don’t want to be on the journey shouldn’t be, and I’ve removed them very quickly. It took me a year, but 90 per cent of our underperformers have now gone.”

Naturally, experience makes you better at identifying strengths and weaknesses. **Chris Merry**, CEO of accountancy firm RSM Tenon, comments: “I’m looking for proof of a professional track record. Are they engaged with the client and do they have the technical knowledge they need to do their job and are they competent at managing people and driving teams? But there are softer skills required too, which are much harder to measure. Clearly, you are looking at their ability to make an impact quite far into the future for them to be really successful.”

According to **Jim Waller**, formerly Group Commercial Director at Carphone Warehouse and Commercial

Director for Foods at Marks & Spencer, the questions around an individual’s attitude are absolutely fundamental: “You’ve got to look much more at the character of the person, how they treat staff and customers and how they talk to people. Is it purely transactional or do they want to understand a bit more about the person?”

“*The people who simply don’t want to be on the journey shouldn’t be*”

3 CONSISTENT MESSAGE

“I’ve seen too many companies where they let people slide by in terms of not meeting performance targets or they’re not keeping to some of the company values, and if they continue to be kept in the firm it produces incredible cynicism around them,” says **Nandani Lynton**, Criticaleye Thought Leader and Adjunct Professor of Management at CEIBS, Shanghai. “If a company won’t stick to what it says it is looking for, it can quickly ruin the morale of everybody else.”

Sarah Murphy, Group HR Director at international food business AB Mauri, says: “Have regular dialogue about personal performance, not just delivery against goals – ‘how’ someone does their job is as important as ‘what’ [they do] when trying to achieve a sustainable organisation.” ▶

4 CAN THEY DELEGATE?

Creating a well-rounded, committed team is a skill in itself. **Ken MacRae**, CEO of real estate concern Northacre, comments: “While I want to see them hitting their targets and producing high quality work, it is important to see growth and development within the team also. The middle managers have a direct impact on this.”

How quickly the team matures will often be defined by how willing a manager is to delegate responsibility. **Jim** says: “Good managers will canvass the opinions of the team around them, thereby allowing individuals to feel that they are making a positive contribution to whatever project they’re working on.

“I remember my boss once said to me: ‘You’ve got a team of doers; what you need are innovators, so you’ve got people who can create value.’ Those that give their teams a to-do-list every week are never going to encourage others to make decisions and therefore be creative. You have to give people enough latitude to make decisions and provide them with the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them.”

5 EMBRACING CHANGE

“The ability to be able to keep reinventing themselves and keep evolving is absolutely critical,” says **Adrian Gunn**, CEO of recruitment agency, Matchtech. “In order to retain the respect of the team around them, they’ve got to keep one step ahead, just as I welcome my management team to challenge me and keep me one step ahead of them.

“It requires a continual evolution of your skills to show that you can keep adding value to that management chain. Those

“*Good managers will canvass the opinions of the team around them*”

that don’t will be caught out and will lose the respect of the team, which may mean they have to exit the business.”

Rod Webster, CEO of mining concern Weatherly International, says: “Circumstances change so quickly that, for me, rigidity in thinking is the biggest problem in managers. In the mining business, for example, we’re constantly subject to political and social forces, changes in commodity prices and work practices and the threat of industrial issues, so the people you employ have to be flexible... but it is pretty hard to get.”

Your middle management can be the biggest source of drive and passion within your business, or an inhibiting force which must be removed. There are various ways and means to bring the blockers and dissenters to light and each director will have their own techniques for spotting them.

Jon, for one, has a pretty straightforward approach. “The presumption from my experience is that anybody who has had more than two divorces is a bad manager,” he declares. ■

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Featuring Commentary From:



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