

# Are You Making my Job Easier or Harder

As a young man serving in the Navy I was fortunate enough to learn quite a bit about leading a team. Of course that did not happen overnight as this young kid knew nothing at all about leading at age 19. After reporting to my first duty station, I was lucky enough to be assigned to an old salt as my supervisor, Senior Chief Petty Officer Billy D. Martin. He was nearing the end of his career as I was just beginning mine. During the eighteen months I served under his command I learned many things. Now old Senior Chief was tough as nails and cut you no slack when it came to doing your duty, which was at all times a reflection on him as the leader. One of the most memorable things he told me was, "Apple, your job is to make my job easier...not harder." Now just what the heck did he mean by that? I did not have to wait long for the answer as he pointed out my small scope of work as compared to his big responsibilities as our division leader. If I did my job well, he had one less thing to worry about. If not, well, then I had increased his workload by having to spend his time correcting my deficiencies. He was quick to point out that if he had to do his job and mine, he did not need me and I

could be sent to work in the galley or some other even less desirable job. How the chain of command worked crystallized for me at that instant and I have carried the same philosophy with me throughout my business career. Incidentally, that old Senior Chief, while always tough on me, was the motivating force behind my quick advancement through the ranks. It was his recommendation that allowed me to get the two stripes pictured in the photo above faster than any other sailor in my division. Thanks, Senior Chief.

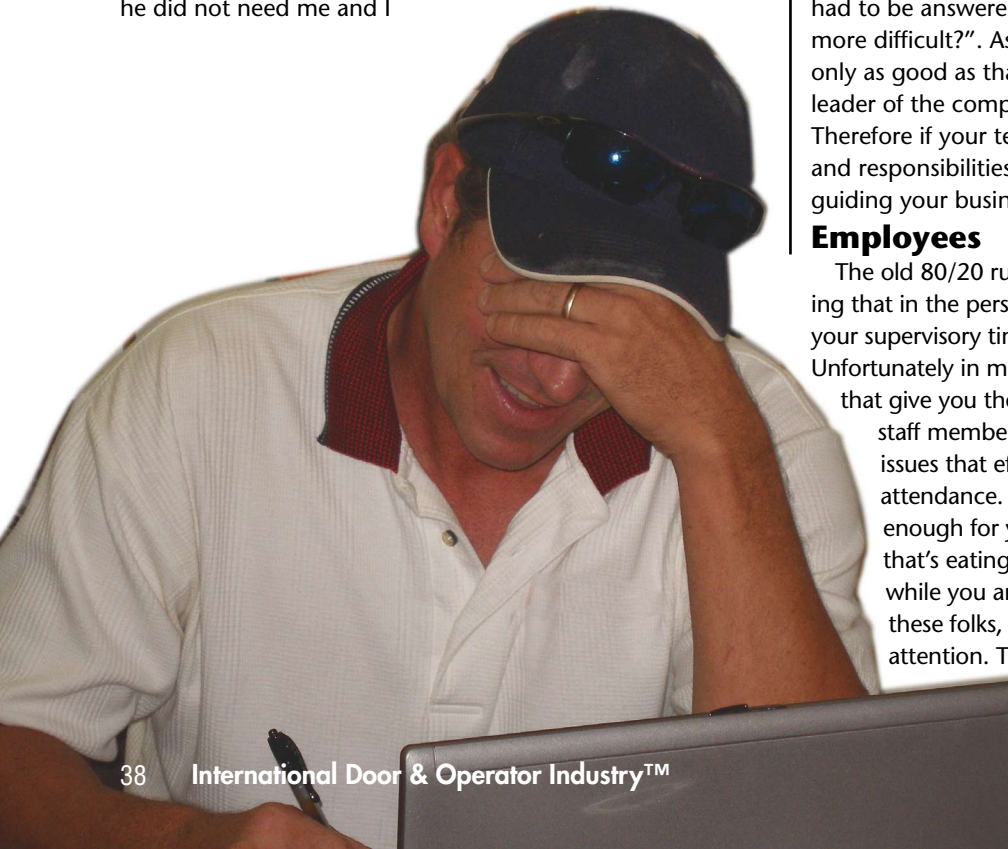


by Dan Apple  
The Apple Group, LLC

So what does that story have to do with your garage door dealership? Plenty. For a business to work well, each person along the "food chain" must do his or her job consistently and at a high level. That sounds very simplistic and it is. During my career as a door dealer when determining how an employee or vendor was performing only one question had to be answered, "are you making my job easier or more difficult?". As the business owner your performance is only as good as that of the people around you. Your job as leader of the company is a difficult one to say the very least. Therefore if your team members are performing their duties and responsibilities at a high level, as the leader your job of guiding your business to success is made much easier.

## Employees

The old 80/20 rule is alive and well in the workplace. Meaning that in the personnel management game, as a rule 80% of your supervisory time is spent on 20% of your direct reports. Unfortunately in most cases this 20% are those employees that give you the most challenges. These high maintenance staff members constantly present you with performance issues that effectively drive you nuts! Among these is attendance. Show me someone that's late or absent enough for you to notice and I'll show you someone that's eating up your management time. Unfortunately while you are spending the bulk of your time with these folks, your best employees get very little of your attention. This is unfair and unwise.



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I always classified our team members with a simple letter grade that reflected their day-in and day-out overall performance. "A" players are your superstars. The go-to men or women that are the heart of your organization. "B" players are Steady-Eddies, dedicated, hardworking, there every day kind of people and are low maintenance. They just do not have the leadership and initiative the A players demonstrate. They may move to the A position at some point but only a few ever do. "C" players are just "making eight". Their work is average and they do the minimum to get by to hang onto their jobs, need close direction and the most supervision. They can improve to the B level but not without growing up some first. "D" players are on their way out of the door. In my 33 years as an employer I never had a team member that did not fit in these categories.

Your job is to hire, inspire and retain A players. This is a tall task at best since it takes months or even longer sometimes to see what a new team member is all about. In the process you will field some B and C players, even a D here and there. But as the coach, you need to be constantly evaluating your team's players and the positions their filling. That requires encouraging you're A players' natural leadership skills and creativity, motivating your B players to take on more responsibility progressing to the A level, and deciding whether to double down on C players in hopes that they'll kick into gear at some point. D players need to be thanked for their service to the company and sent on their way. They are not doing you or you're A and B players any favors. Sounds harsh? To confirm this and eliminate your doubts, just ask one of you're a players if they'd like to work with your suspected D player and see what they tell you. There's an old adage that says to be slow to hire and quick to fire. Maybe so. I would agree that doing a thorough job of screening, interviewing and matching up the prospective employee to the position on the front end is critical. How do their goals match up with the company's? Do they seem to have characteristics that will match up with your other team members that will make this a good fit? Did they say the magic words during the interview process? "If you give me a chance I'll show you that I can do this job better than most", now wouldn't that be something. While you may not always hit a homerun of achieving a long term, terrific hire, you at least increased your chances by investing time in learning about your next possible superstar.

I read a book about ten years ago entitled *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. There were many terrific best practices identified used by some of the most successful companies in the world. However the one that stuck with me was the concept of "getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off of the bus". Simply stated, companies that made the transition from being a good company to a great company were constantly recruiting and hiring the best people to fill the most important positions. They realized that paying for performance is what was most important in their efforts to take their company to the next level of success. Since there are only so many "seats on the bus" that meant that some people had to go. The net effect was that good employees



were more inspired to become great employees, which caused these companies to soar. While that may all sound like Fortune 500 mumbo jumbo, I assure you it applies to any size business. You harness the talents of great people you can accomplish great things in a hurry!

### Suppliers and Vendors

My simplistic rating system for measuring performance applied to the company's suppliers and vendors also. Just as you're only as good as your employees, as a company you are as only good as your suppliers and those companies that support your business. Material suppliers, professional services, banks, sub contractors etc., basically any support player needed to deliver our brand to our customers.

Let's consider a couple examples by starting nearer the top of the "food chain".....your material suppliers. More specifically, your main garage door supplier. Let us first agree that in most cases their "paycheck" from your business each year is perhaps the largest of all disbursements. Having put it in that context, how is their performance relative to what they are getting paid to do? It has been very popular to use the vernacular "partnering" when describing the relationship between supplier and distributor. Does it really feel like a partnership? Maybe consider applying the aforementioned grading scale to the following.

- Do they continually provide innovative products that lead the industry?
- How well are their products accepted by your customers?
- How's their overall product quality?
- Are they flexible? Do they offer the product customization that you need?
- Consistent, on time delivery.
- Sales and technical training support.
- Marketing and promotional support programs.
- How are they at problem solving? Are mistakes corrected quickly?
- How easy are they to do business with overall?

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I'm sure there are other performance criteria that you can come up with but the point is to rate them and then ask yourself, are they making my job easier or more difficult. Do I consider them a valuable part of our team or do I find myself spending a lot of time dealing with issues they created? Like employees, there are plenty of A+ garage door suppliers that can serve you well. Is yours one of them?

Another example is a support professional such as your banker. Do you feel like you're working for him or her or do you consider them a valuable part of your team. During my tenure I've had both. What should you expect from your company's financial resource? Maybe more than you are currently receiving. Here's just a few that come to mind.

- How well does your banker communicate with you? Easy access? Quick answers to your requests?
- Does your banker proactively contact you periodically just to see how things are going and to offer his/her services to your business?
- Do you have a dedicated account manager that understands your industry?
- How are the fees? Do you feel like they're nickel and diming you or has your banker come up with creative ways to keep your costs low?
- What about ideas to put the money you keep in the bank to work? Has your banker phoned lately with some new ideas?
- Does your banker have local lending authority for quick loan request turnaround, or does it have to go through layers of "committee approvals" before you can get a decision?

As with the previous example, how would your bank rate? It truly is all about performance and that's how everyone on your team should be rewarded. Each year as we closed our books I would get a listing of all the company's vendors that received payments of any kind during the year. That was my opportunity to reflect on their performances. My hope was to make a lot of phone calls thanking them for their superior service to our business that year. Occasionally however, the phone call was a bit more tense. Nevertheless, they heard from me each year and our expectations for their services were always clear.

## What about you?

As the owner, president, CEO or whatever title you prefer, your staff, suppliers and support professionals get to ask the same about you. Are you making their job easier or harder? Yes, that's right. You have an obligation to those people that support you and your business daily. It's not just a one way street. What should they expect from you? The same amount you expect from them plus. Here's a partial list.

- Are you accessible to your employees, suppliers and vendors?
- Are your communications timely and concise?
- Do you respect the time of others as you would like yours respected?
- Do you invest your time and energy to constantly create an atmosphere of success where your employees can see possibility for advancement and favorable future for themselves by working for your company?

- Are you diligent about setting the performance standards and then applying them evenly across the board?
- Do you invest in your employees education with a comprehensive training program in all aspects of your business?
- Do you put your money where your mouth is? Have you invested in an incentive bonus plan that rewards superior performance for all levels of employees?
- Are you constantly looking for ways to guide your team to the next level of success? If so, do you share that with all of your employees and ask for their input?
- Are you a good distributor? Do you promote your suppliers product in your local market to increase share? Do you discount or pay your bills on time, every time?
- Do you offer constructive ideas and market feedback that may help your supplier build a better quality product? Ever volunteer to serve on a dealer council?

We could list many more but the point is that this business of making someone's job easier or more difficult applies to all of the people working towards the common goal of building a successful and profitable company. As its leader, making this job easier starts with you.

## Summary

A business is like any sports team. No one position can carry the team to victory. It takes the coach or manager and all of the players in the various key positions, working together to make the plays needed to score points and ultimately win the game. If we consider a football team each position can make the next one easier or more difficult. Take for instance the least glamorous position of center. He's in the trenches, doesn't hear his name called on the P.A. system and seldom does anything that gets applause. But without a consistently precise exchange of the ball between he and the quarterback not much good can happen. Clearly the center can make the quarterback's job easier or harder in a split second. The same applies to all of the various positions. Ultimately, the players doing their job impacts the coach's ability to do his. And if done effectively, the players load is lightened also.

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