

If It Looks Like a Duck It Probably Isn't Leadership

By Brian Canning
"Sapient Ramblings"



I have this very bad habit of looking at things and short of them being cleverly camouflaged, I can generally make a quick determination as to what I am seeing, hearing, touching or smelling. Sometimes an object, despite those first appearances, will seem out of place and I will try to determine how it got there or why but for the most part most of us can look at a duck, see that it walks like a duck and pretty quickly determine that it is in fact a duck. Despite the extraordinary efforts at camouflage you are likely to see, this is particularly true of human behavior.

When I begin to look at a business in an effort to help the owner determine where the bleeding is, I always start with the numbers, though it is very rare that I am looking at sales. In my experience the sales themselves are not likely to tell me anything other than we have enough or not enough. Sales will not tell me our profit margins or our productivity or how consistent we are in our inspection process and therefore sales will get little more than a passing glance. The sales generally are what they are. Of much more interest to me is average repair order, effective labor rate and tech productivity and with these numbers, the state of leadership and accountability in the store.

Leadership is a tough one for most of us and too often we confuse it with management. Management is absolutely critical to our being successful and it involves our ability to handle 'stuff'; things like time, tasks and process, as opposed to people. I have known many great managers that were disasters at leadership, guys that were organized down to the second and last task but were absolutely hopeless in leading their people. The impact here can be huge and is often most obvious in how the business is performing. I would describe it like this; a great manager will develop the perfect process that will address a performance problem within a store and in doing so will take into consideration available resources, anticipate the result and even develop a process to manage the exceptions. The problem will start for the manager the very second he tries to implement this "perfect" process and runs into

resistance. Maybe at your store technicians enthusiastically nod their heads as we attempt to change or try something new but in my world any hint of change sets off a tidal wave of objections and threats. This is our moment of truth and very often this is the moment that improved process dies. That is unless we are willing and prepared to lead.

I have a great Midwest client who owns four high performing stores. Or more correctly, he owns three high performing stores and one that is operating at something below where we would expect it to be. This store manager is knowledgeable, experienced, hard working, a great manager but completely blind to leadership. In recent weeks I have become very involved in his store operation. In looking at his numbers I immediately saw average repair order and tech productivity way out of line with the other stores. In investigating the causes for this it became very obvious that we were inconsistent in our inspection process and had put procedures in place that assured control but diminished production. In other words we implemented a process to assure that the cars were seen by the sales people (a good thing to be sure) but at the cost of production capacity and shop flow. The result was reduced sales, slow turn around, frustrated customers and a store that underperformed month after month. The manager was convinced that his guys were working hard, which they were. The truth turned out to be an inconsistent inspection process and a lack of appropriate oversight, which resulted in a crew working very hard to underachieve. Somehow we had great people failing to live up to reasonable expectations.

Another important aspect here is buy-in and belief in what we are doing. Leaders are judged strictly on their ability to deliver the goods and great intentions will not be a comfort when our store flounders. You need to believe to lead and lead to achieve. In my experience leading without belief is like running blind. You will certainly move but never get anywhere and painful accidents are likely to occur. If you believe in the journey your people will pick up on that and willingly follow you wherever you would choose to go. You can't fake it! Setting standards for excellence, holding your people accountable to the result and being willing to insist on something better will make that plan into a consistent reality. It begins and ends with leadership.

How many physically talented teams in the world of sports fail to achieve because of poor coaching? On the other side of that coin, how many teams of average talent excel because of consistently excellent coaching. Are UCLA or Carolina or Indiana basketball accidents? Is it any different with General Electric or Microsoft? What about your shop?

You show me a shop with a poor inspection process, low average repair order (ARO) and low productivity and I'll show you a shop with leadership issues. What are we going to do about that?

Leadership and hard work would seem the obvious choice to me.

About the author:

Brian Canning is as a leadership and management coach with the Automotive Training Institute (ATI) in Savage MD. After serving as a tank commander with the 1st Armored Division in Europe, he started his career as a Goodyear service manager in suburban Washington, D.C., moving on to oversee several stores and later a sales region. He also has been a retail sales manager for a large auto parts distributor, run a large fleet operation and headed a large multi-state sales territory for an independent manufacturer of automotive parts. His passions are history and leadership.

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