

Betting on your Team: The Case of the Customer Service Center

By Madelyn Blair

Key Learning: Whether or not you are dealing with a seismic shift in technology like the one described in this article, change is a permanent part of every manager's work. You probably already know that you can make it work for you by trusting and respecting the strengths of the people who work for you. But how, specifically, does that look? Here you will find practical instruction on how to provide the right balance of freedom and support to help employees gain productivity, even during periods of great change.

Remember when the PC appeared? In a time of executives traveling with laptops and sending messages from their Blackberries around the clock, it is hard to remember when letters were dictated and reports written in longhand and then typed by secretaries. But when the personal computer made its debut, panic and scrambling ensued at every level of the corporate hierarchy.

The World Bank struggled along with everyone else through this transition. In 1982, WB manager Madelyn Blair saw that someone would have to provide support and education to the institution as a whole to make the change work. This is the story of how she catalyzed her team's strengths to create a state-of-the-art response to the crisis.

The Challenge

Computers had been in the workplace for years, of course, but they were stored out of sight in temperature-controlled rooms, and kept under the purview of IT professionals. Suddenly, they were on everyone's desk. With their arrival, seasoned executives found they had to abandon their yellow legal pads and memorize precise instructions just to open or close a document. If they hit the wrong key, their work could disappear from sight. Expertise in economics or international development was suddenly trumped by an ability to access the help menu.

The support staff that executives turned to for help was equally flummoxed. The ability to type 100 words per minute mattered little when it took a half hour to find out the formatting command that replaced rolling a piece of paper halfway into a Selectric to center a title page.

Questions were abundant: Who is in charge of my PC – me, or the computer guys? Can I program my own computer, or is there a World Bank standard? Am I required to use it, or am I allowed to drag the typewriter out of storage? How do you turn this thing on? But it wasn't clear to whom these questions should be directed.

These concerns now seem like quaint stories from a grandmother's childhood. Workplaces now have steadfast policies for computer use, and most of us could not get through the day without one. In fact, the machine that once antagonized in the workplace has now been invited into most homes, and many of today's kindergartners can operate a

mouse before they can tie their shoes. But at the time these uncertainties were no laughing matter. Something had to be done.

The decision was made during a reorganization of the computing activities department. Everyone agreed, “We don’t understand how this can be done, but we know it has to be done. If we don’t change, we will be killed as a department altogether, people are going outside the Bank for their computer needs.” Then everyone looked at Madelyn. It was clear that the energy and experience for the undertaking would come from that quarter. “You’re the only person who sees both sides of the coin, you’ve been in the trenches using databases, and you’ve been dealing with the clients personally too,” her managers told her.

Madelyn knew it would be difficult to maintain a personal life with such an overwhelming project. She commuted from 50 miles away, and this was a complex and demanding task. But, she says,

I could see the perplexed faces looking at me for help. I remembered different people from my days of helping decentralize databases, directors like the confident, sassy American and the Italian who was so anxious he was shaking. I did have empathy for the frustration of the end user. I love to put a solution in front of someone.

Seeing that no one else was qualified to be the bridge between IT knowledge and customer service, she agreed to be at the eye of the storm. The demoralized and often desperate people from every rung of the corporate ladder who needed computer assistance would come to the “World Bank Customer Service Center” that she and her team would create. Madelyn describes the need.

Our division did not have all the technical answers – few people did in those days - but I believed we could provide an interface between the end user and the computer. Our most pressing job was to provide support to the person sitting in front of a dark screen, feeling powerless. We focused on guiding 6,000 Bank employees successfully into the emerging age of workplace technology. This meant that my staff had to be flexible and inventive enough to respond to demands as they emerged. My team fielded calls from support staff, contractors, and executives, and had to determine workable solutions for a complexity of different problems. At the same time, we had to perform according to objectives and budgetary limitations just like any other division.

The Management Strategies

Inspired, Madelyn set about meeting this challenge, using a number of key strategies. She started by *asking her staff to develop their own approaches to problem solving*. At annual retreats, for example, the group reviewed departmental objectives determined by the Bank and took a few days to develop their own strategies. Madelyn gave them total freedom to invent as they saw fit, and they responded to her faith in them by delivering.

Sonia Bisaccia, who later worked for three years for Madelyn's private firm, Pelerei, speaks to this:

I really felt like she wanted to see me succeed and she expected my work to be top notch. She expected that I was capable of it and wouldn't want to let her down. She flattered me by some of the things that she expected of me. If someone expects you do exceptional work, you don't want to let them down.

Madelyn was focused on delivering results, but, equally, she was *genuinely concerned about the development of her employees*. She says;

I knew that this sense of freedom would not only help us get our work done, but would also offer a number of staff members the chance to succeed that may have eluded them in a different department. This is because some of my team members were technically bright, but often reserved.

Sonia describes her own experience of Madelyn's desire to contribute to her as an employee:

I knew that I was working for the profit of the company and also I felt like at the same time that she wanted me to benefit personally from the work I was doing for her. And it's true, when I came away from that position, my skills were off the charts. My future employers gained from that. When I left my last research position, I created a detailed manual for my replacement, only because I had learned from Madelyn all about explicit and tacit knowledge. They were thrilled.

Madelyn also *assumed that her employees were eager to contribute*. She saw in each one a commitment to the Bank, the division, and to the vision of getting 6,000 people onboard with new technology.

Their commitment was one of the most important strengths that I needed to channel. I let them know that I valued their capacity to empathize with the user's perspective, which was critical to providing on-target suggestions. People were often at the end of their rope when they called us, as they felt the computer was undermining their ability to meet a deadline or to perform well for their superiors. My team had to integrate interpersonal and technical skills in a way that was relatively new but remains essential to technical support today. They were each committed to responding to people's needs in a prompt, informed, and equitable manner – no matter who had placed the call. They crawled under the desk to check on hardware problems in a vice president's office, retrieved lost documents on a secretary's desktop and helped the printing office test their new software.

Recognizing that everyone brings something to a team, Madelyn *trusted her intuition* in assigning responsibilities to her employees, harnessing what she had. Her confidence in her judgement came from three years of team development.

The first three years I had staff meetings with 6 people from the division. I realized that they were the source of the policies we would institute. They understood the needs and I made sure they understood the constraints from above. They might have seemed like a motley crew, but really all had different skills – political, educational, technical – that we needed on board. The nerdy technical guy always gave me absolutely accurate, detailed answers. He couldn't see the whole picture without the detail. But I made sure that whatever task I gave him had details. He put together and managed the hotline, staffed at the time by three people. The tall handsome former colonel knew how to make things happen. We took on a librarian who understood the human element and how to cater to people's needs. I got them to value each other. I eventually pared the group down to four, and we learned together with what we had.

Madelyn claims that people will become dynamos if you give them something that puts them a little over the line, and push them, but don't demoralize them by putting it too far out or putting them in the wrong arena. Sonia confirms this:

She pushed me, but she was always right that I could handle it. She was my first manager out of college, which was great because something she was really good at was gauging my capabilities. If she knew I'd have no problems, she'd just lay it out. *Things that were more complicated, she would give a task as a stepping stone and then say use that and do this with it, all the way through until we had a complete product. She didn't micromanage at all.* If it was necessary, she would help me along, but if she knew I was capable, she would just give me the whole task. *Some people give you something you've never done before that's not even in your field just because they don't want to deal with it, and then when you come back with something they say, 'That's not what I wanted.'* That never happens with her. *Other people are always looking over your shoulder and would have saved time by just doing it themselves.* Madelyn takes the time to gauge and then has complete faith in you. Once she sent me to teach a computer class at the World Bank, something I'd never done and wouldn't have imagined doing. I don't think many people would have taken that risk. It went great.

What the Team Produced

The team responded to Madelyn's faith in them beautifully, using their deep understanding of what was needed to assist the user to develop a number of responses to meet these needs. They had to constantly educate employees, for example, which led to many discussions about the best way to institute training. Madelyn explains:

I knew I needed to do something completely different. The Bank employees did not just need to learn which commands were needed to print a document. Instead, they needed to take a step back and re-conceptualize their relationship to work. They needed to grasp how databases could impact the way they used their research, for example, and to recognize the advantages of using their own word

processing capabilities to compose and edit documents. I wanted to provide a new, innovative way to help them successfully meet this challenge.

The librarian on the team suggested trying something completely new: a learning community. It was a risky venture at the time, but Madelyn decided to trust her. Before the term “communities of practice” emerged into workplace vernacular, this librarian invited people to shift their learning from a singular to a social experience. She filled the division’s library with contemporary academic journals and consumer computer magazines. Issues of *PC World*, *InfoWorld* and *Dr. Dobb’s Journal* were scattered on tables, while technical manuals lined the shelves. She hosted weekly gatherings to encourage people to use the computer and try new programs. The events created their own energy, drawing-in people from all over the Bank to compare notes, share insights, resolve problems and help one another find their footing. The library is still at the Bank, and still cited for its excellence.

Division members also recognized the needs of some employees to learn at their own pace, and to have the time to become familiar with a software program before applying it to a work assignment. They therefore designed a “presentation room” that contained computer workstations and an overhead screen, to show employees the applications they had at their fingertips. Individuals could take as much time as they needed to explore. The design of this room remained at the Bank for this use for 15 years. Madelyn tells the story:

We weren’t responsible for the applications out there but we had to make people understand how the applications could be useful to them. We brought people in so they would be able to say “Oh, so *that’s* how you use it!” We had 12 workstations mounted on continuous tables with an instructor at the top. So each person had their own monitor. The projector on the ceiling cost the equivalent of \$12,000 -- today they cost less than \$1000. The thing weighed about 70 pounds. I stood at the door and made sure food did not enter that room. Not even VPs could bring in coffee. In those days, if you messed up a keyboard it was a big deal. The tech people came in and just laughed because they thought the idea of describing their specialized work to the layman was ludicrous. The users were in total awe. We eventually threw the technicians out and courses were taught by people who understood what it means to teach. At that point it became like what you see today in computer training.

The staff also wanted to help keep employees remain informed about changes in technology, so they developed the Bank’s first internal newsletter. They offered information to help with consumer purchases, as well, believing that the use of home computers would help employees on the job.

Madelyn was satisfied with her team’s performance, but wanted to insure that nothing was falling through the cracks, so she hired a consultant who had worked with departments charged with instituting technology at other organizations. The consultant observed team members helping employees to resolve issues, joined learning gatherings

in the library, tried out a computer workstation in the presentation room, and reviewed the newsletter. She came away shaking her head.

“I cannot help you,” she said. “You are the state of the art. There is nothing out there that you have not already created.”

What it Takes

As we look more closely at the strategies Madelyn used to obtain these results, all in some way fundamentally related to a strengths-based outlook, capture on paper any thoughts you have on applying them to advantage in your own management environment. As we saw above, you could focus on the following areas:

- Ask staff to invent their own solutions
- Show your genuine concern for the development of your employees
- Assume your employees are committed and eager to contribute
- Trust your intuition in assigning responsibilities
- Take calculated risks on your people and their ideas

Madelyn’s choice to give her team so much freedom was partly due to the constraints of the work - new demands were always emerging, making flexibility a necessity. The team needed systems that allowed them to meet their objectives, yet afforded them the leeway to respond effectively to unanticipated requests. In making them responsible for their own timelines and accomplishments, Madelyn brought out their and capitalized on their brilliance. The appreciative environment she created allowed them to harness their strengths and do their best work.

Another of Madelyn’s employees, Mary Beth X, claims that there are specific messages that Madelyn communicates which accomplish this:

She radiates a positive attitude. I really want to help her succeed. She knows what she wants and how to make you do your best for the business. She is very open and honest in explaining things without intimidating you, she’s very supportive as she guides and directs. I’ve learned how to do a lot of things that I didn’t do before, and I’ve learned not to be afraid of computers. Her attitude comes through all the time. Just today, we had some problems, and she as usual was willing to stop and try to make things better and enhance my knowledge.

Sonia adds:

She’s got really good intuition and understanding of people’s abilities and she has faith in people. She doesn’t just expect that everyone’s stupider than she is. I think her concern for her employees’ development comes from the fact that she is really in touch with, well, improving the world, I guess. I think she understands that her employees are people she’s in really close contact with and it’s a chance for her to improve someone that will then go on to improve the world.

Madelyn herself emphasizes reliance on intuition:

This was a case where I listened to my intuition, and it made all the difference. I was confident in my staff, even when others were not, and based my decisions about them on my own experiences. I took risks. I felt that the training had to be different, and trusted in new ways that departed from conventional instruction. I managed from my belief that every person has something to contribute or they should be somewhere else where their strengths can be harnessed. The payoff was enormous.

The technological challenges in this story may be history, but the lessons in leadership remain relevant. Today's changes present the same opportunities to listen to your intuition, take risks and trust in the strengths of your staff.