

Perseverance
by
Raymond E. Muth

Valley News Dispatch 8/30/07 - Community Columnist

We once had a client who was big on motivational posters. You know... the ones that tell you that you can soar like a bird, accomplish anything, whistle while you work, etc. They had these posters plastered everywhere throughout their offices.

This company meant well and really believed in empowering employees. The problem was their actions were the complete opposite. They were great at outlining responsibilities and defining who was accountable. But they were lacking when it came to giving up any sort of authority. Everything was decided at the top. Saying one thing and doing something else is not the formula for good motivation. In fact, it usually has the opposite effect.

In this case, it was so demoralizing that the Information Technology Manager would surround himself with what he called demotivational posters. These were posters that had pictures of failures or foolishness with tag lines upholding mediocrity, laziness and even stupidity. Much like the Dibert cartoon strip, it was so true to life, it had me chuckling.

While I believe in good organizational development practices to help inspire and motivate employees, I guess you could say I never saw a motivational poster that didn't come off as trite or as a bunch of hot air. That was until I walked into a new client's office a couple months ago.

Within their lobby was one solitary poster. It hung in a corner with a light shining on it. It was a picture of one of our famous Presidents and the words were so inspiring that my jaw dropped. I soon found myself opening up my notebook and writing it all down. It said the following:

"He failed in business in '31. He was defeated for state legislator in '32. He tried another business in '33. It failed. His fiancée died in '35. He had a nervous breakdown in '36. In '43 he ran for congress and was defeated. He tried again in '48 and was defeated again. He tried running for the Senate in '55. He lost. The next year he ran for Vice President and lost. In '59 he ran for the Senate again and was defeated. In 1860, the man who signed his name A. Lincoln, was elected the 16th President of the United States. The difference between history's boldest accomplishments and its most staggering failures is often, simply, the diligent will to persevere."

Not being a history buff, I was overwhelmed at Lincoln's list of failures. I had no idea. But I had a good idea about the kind of person running this organization. He was probably someone with a steely resolve to turn obstacles into stepping stones. And I had a hunch he was probably one with enormous respect and credibility among his employees.

As I met with the CEO, I was struck by his words. “We may not be doing everything the right way. And I need you to help me find someone who can help us understand things that we do not yet understand. We know change is inevitable. We know we need to continually be open to change. I worry when we start to feel a little too comfortable around here. I need to find someone who we can first trust and then allow him/her to help take us where we need to go.”

My assignment was not to perform our usual organizational development analysis. Instead it was to find the right person who would carry the torch for what appeared to be a highly motivated group of employees. What was most intriguing is I found myself being naturally enthusiastic about this company. As interviewees came in a few weeks later I found myself being an unabashed advocate for this firm. And so I added a new question to my repertoire. “How do you overcome failure?” Some said they would call upon experts. Others said they would find an alternative. These answers were reasonable. But the one they ended up hiring simply said, “I stay at the job and do whatever it takes. I may not get it right the first time but I never ever give up.”



[E-Mail Ray](#)

[Home](#) | [About Me](#) | [Family](#) | [Critters](#) | [Work](#) | [Articles](#) | [Archives](#)