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Treating People like Mushrooms

One of the fondest expressions in business is "our people are our most important assets," then they fail to communicate, or to get them involved.

There is an old but appropriate joke about treating team members (people), as mushrooms. "Keep them in the dark, and shovel them _____, or_____!"

The practice of little or no transparency is pervasive in the political arena as well as the workplace. The partner of no information is misinformation. Both result in negative interactions between the people and government, and employees and management in the workplace.

For the purposes of this paper, the target is communications between project team members and leaders.

The following story strikes at the heart of many failed projects

Number 8

Some years ago, a business group I belonged to conducted a training session testing 'inclusion'. The participants were professional businesspersons. The exercise demonstrated how people in a group environment react based on how they are treated. The participants counted out a number from one through eight. The session leader dismissed the ones, threes, and eights. In their absence, the remaining participants received the following instructions.

> "When the ones return, they are always correct regardless of what they say. Agree with them in every case.
>
> Listen to the number threes but regardless of correctness, disagree with them. They are wrong.
>
> Treat the number eights as non-persons. Move your chairs close together to keep them out of the group. Do not acknowledge their presence or listen to their input."

The number ones, some completely wrong but exonerated and supported by the group, soon relaxed, becoming open and vocal. All demonstrated secure positive body language.

The number threes, many of them correct, were increasingly vocal and agitated, raising their voices as they passionately pleaded their cause. Some finally gave up in frustration.

The number eights tried to rejoin the group but were shunned, their presence and input rejected. Before the session ended, in less than five minutes, some eights were angrily standing on their chairs screaming at their groups.

The balance of the group had the advantage of inclusion, and went along with every direction given by the instructor.

When the session ended, the instructor stated the ones, threes, and eights had reacted precisely as expected. They were not impressed. The negative feelings from even a short experience were very intense, and some of the number 3s and 8s were upset with team members for weeks. The number 8 in our group never missed an opportunity to remind us that we had "betrayed him."

Frustration

Participation and involvement are keys to human interaction. The major effect of poor communications, rejection, or lack of inclusion, may be withdrawal, anger, frustration, or all three. These emotions, per my college psychology professor, have three outlets.

1. Take out the frustration internally with self-destructive activities, withdrawal, and non-participation.
2. Take it out on others through negative action and attitudes.
3. Convert the frustration into a positive purpose, personal or social. Those positive actions may be directed to some other effort, not on project needs, nor even work related.

Project management

Every manager has seen all of these negative responses at some point in their business lives. For the most part, simple inclusion goes a long way. For those managers having problems with Millennials, remember, their entire lives are centered on social interaction.

Every project manager or leader knows it is difficult to take a group of people and build a team. A four-step process is required, as the one outlined in my book *Decision-making in a Disruptive Reordering.*

At the heart of the process is inclusion for the team members - information sharing, training, involvement, and an empowered decision-making process.

An empowered work force is the key to creativity and innovation. Empowered teams are the greatest factor to project success. This applies to ERP and Lean projects. Both are big-ticket expenses and essential to business success.

Security

The issue of workplace inclusion has an ominous side. The most destructive employee you have may be a number 3 or 8, or simply one who is angry, disloyal or disconnected, but with access to the business information system.
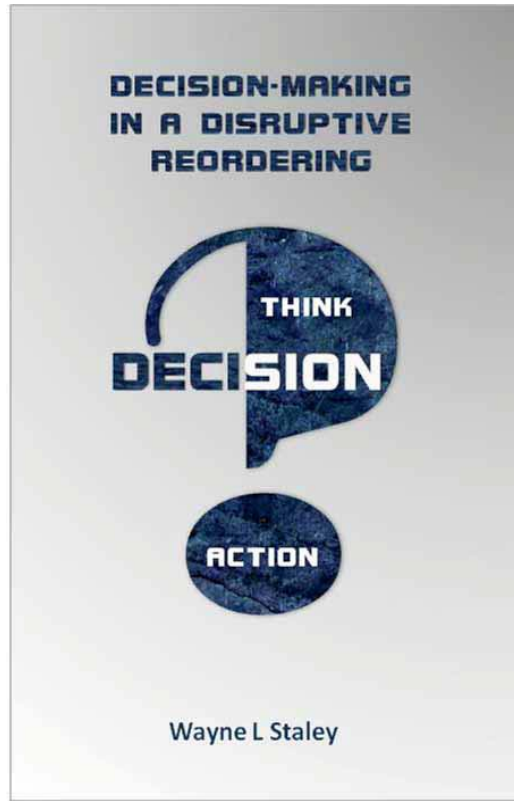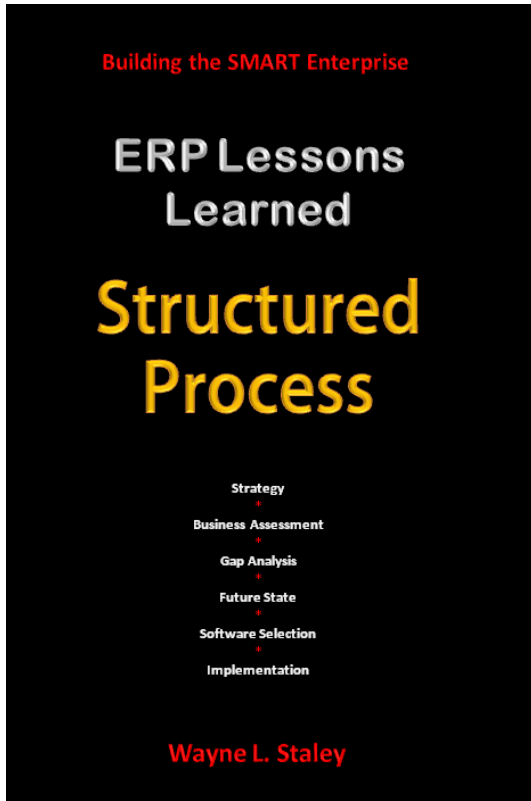
When researching our book*, They Will do anything - to Steal our Digital identities and victimize our lives,* we found numerous examples involving employees committing cybercrime. Some were deliberate, by disenfranchised individuals. Other cases involved malware inadvertently downloaded to the corporate computer system by uninformed or untrained employees.

The message is clear.

Without question - employees truly are the most important business asset, and deserve much more than being treated like mushrooms. Inclusion is a magic word, and your business may depend on it.

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