

Pulling together during divisive times



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Returning from a recent vacation, my wife, Janet, and I visited the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Ill.

It had been on my “to do” list for a couple of years — a personal pilgrimage with a need amplified by the current state of affairs in our country. The museum is very well done, and several of the exhibitions have stuck with me since. One was Lincoln’s wisdom and fortitude as he warned, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Indeed, as we learn more about Russia’s meddling in our affairs, one tactic used was to plant extreme fabricated “news” stories on social media, playing to both ends of the political spectrum. The goal was simply to divide the nation. They were successful.

Anyone who competes in team sports experiences the occasional situation when a team is struggling and turns on itself. Few things are more reassuring when observed in an opponent, few more dire when detected in one’s team. Game over.

So how do we ensure that our organizations hold together, especially at a time when its members almost certainly fall on different sides of the various arguments that are pulling the country apart? Like everything else, it starts with leadership.

Hopefully your organization has a common belief system that can and should be continually emphasized.

- Our mission statement explains why we co-exist as a group of people.
- Our values describe the shared ideals that guide us as we work together.
- Our vision illuminates our mutual aspiration.

Obviously these are only words; they must be backed with the consistent behaviors of all within the organization, especially managers. That includes ensuring that behavioral alignment with values is a strong consideration for hiring, promotion, recognition and discipline. We cannot assume that everyone is familiar with decent behavior. It must be clear that the trolling that passes for dialogue on Facebook will not be tolerated in the workplace.

Especially critical at this juncture is that managers model how we disagree – with respect, empathy, willingness to listen and ultimately an ability to come to-

gether for a shared solution. Properly managed, conflict makes us stronger as it leverages diversity of thought just as hybrid seeds use the different traits of parents for a more productive plant. Mishandled, conflict separates us into camps of inbred freaks.

Early in my career, a co-worker and I were lamenting a decision by upper management while Charlie, a sage and seasoned middle manager listened. He calmly and firmly cut us off stating, “We have to trust that our leaders likely have more information on the situation than we do and that they are striving to make the best decisions possible for the business. Once we lose faith in our leaders, we’re done.”

Although learned more than 30 years ago, that lesson remains. (The lesson is clearly invalid if leaders are engaging in unethical behavior.)

Prompting folks to identify the various alternatives customers have is a not-so-subtle way of reminding everyone that we all wear the same jersey. In the case of nonprofits targeting various social ills (e.g., hunger, homelessness, cancer or illiteracy), the competitor can truly be demonized as a means of refocusing the troops on a common enemy.

Beware of cult leaders within your organization. These are managers who lead very tight-knit groups under the guise of teamwork. However, their “teams” appear to be an end in themselves and don’t interact well with the rest of the organization. The ultimate display of leaders and teamwork is not how strong of a unit they build, but how well they team with their peers.

Although no doubt controversial, a healthy mental image for me is the players on different sides of the national anthem protest — standing players with one hand over their heart, the other on the shoulder of

a kneeling teammate. It states, “I don’t agree with you on this matter, but I respect your stance. Let’s win this game!”

In addition to being vital to your organization’s success, building a healthy culture where people learn to grow from diversity of thought can hopefully extend outside of work to positively influence the norms of society. Wouldn’t that be a nice goal for 2018?

RICK SAYS

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