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## Create a Learning Environment

A work environment that encourages learning is essential for continuous productivity improvement. First, clearly send the message to your people that continuing mental and educational development – through both formal and informal plans – is vital. Then nurture the three primary freedoms that create a learning environment: freedom to express dissent, freedom to make mistakes, and freedom to invest time in learning.

An indispensable aspect of a learning environment is the freedom to engage in solution-oriented discussion and discovery. Make sure people are rewarded not for maintaining the status quo but for achieving constructive results. When people sense undue pressure to agree and to conform, they avoid pointing out even the most obvious problems for the sake of maintaining consensus and goodwill. The results are often embarrassing, and at worst, tragic. In contrast, a dynamic learning environment nurtures and supports people who express their ideas about existing policies and procedures that are not working well. Irate controversy, of course, is to be avoided; courtesy and positive attitudes should always be valued and maintained. Constructive, courteous dissent produces creativity, progress, and productivity.

Encourage those who possess the ability and the inclination to pursue answers to complex questions. One common yet misguided approach related to time efficiency is the autocratic demand for immediate answers and solutions. This approach rewards shallow thinking on the part of team members and exerts pressure to be agreeable at all costs. Give people adequate time and support to develop insightful solutions.

Valuable experience involves making mistakes and learning from them. If you never make a mistake, it is because you have never stretched to reach a new challenge. Mistakes teach people what does not work. Then they are free to move in a new direction to reach desirable goals. Establish "safety nets," policies that protect people when they make honest mistakes in pursuit of corporate goals. In so doing, you encourage them to shed their protective, perfectionistic guards and to experience enthusiasm for innovation and learning.

Give your team members the freedom to schedule the necessary time for job-related educational development. Appropriate time allocation is a key factor in creating a learning environment. Although continuing education and training take time away from immediate results, the investment of time now provides huge dividends later. Goal setting, leadership, and management development are important for all team members' continued professional development.

A healthy, dynamic learning environment is characterized by freedom to express dissent, to make mistakes, and to invest time in learning. These elements of a learning environment provide the necessary backdrop for effective communication, leading to continuous improvement and increased productivity.

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