Does Your Organization Have a We/They Problem?

Description

D.C. Reeves is on the staff of the Studer Community Institute. D.C. is the chief entrepreneur officer for The Spring, a one-stop hub for people wanting to start or grow a business. These past six years D.C. has worked with me, Iâ??ve seen him start his own businesses and write *The Microbrewery Handbook*, published by Wiley. This past week, D.C. and I were discussing how important it is to continually provide development to all staff. As we were talking about people in management, the topic of â??we/theyâ?• came up. Our conversation inspired me to make it the subject of this column.

We/they is the great culture buster in organizations. When we draw peopleâ??s attention to this issue, they quickly realize how damaging it is. In my workshops, when attendees left, they completed a survey. One of the questions asked was, *What is one thing you will stop doing?* The number-one item was we/they.

So, what is meant by we/they? It is when a person positions themselves positively at the expense of someone else. I find that leaders who do this do not normally do it on purpose. Some probably do, but many managers are not even aware they are doing it. Maybe you have been on one end of a we/they conversation. Your leader shares that if it were up to them, the answer would be yesâ??and then they add, â??But you know how administration is.â?•

Here is one example. It is budget time. The manager comes back to share with the staff that some things they asked for have been turned down. If the manager says words like, â??I fought for you, but administration took it out of the budget,â?• they have the staff thanking them and almost feeling sorry for the manager who must deal with administration.

What would be a better answer in that scenario is, â??Administration made some difficult decisions based on the request of dollars being more than available. In looking at the decisions, I support them. Though we are not getting some things we asked for, I understand why. I am confident we will make it work with what we have.â?• Part of a managerâ??s job is to connect the dots for employees, and to do it in a way that creates unity, not division.

Another example: An employee asks to leave early. The manager knows the company needs that employee to stay. Instead of the manager handling it directly, they say, â??Let me run this by _____ (name of their supervisor).â?• Then, when they come back to the employee, they can say, â??I ran it by _____, and the answer is no.â?• The employee thanks their supervisor for trying, and walks away disliking their supervisorâ??s leader.

A way to check for we/they in an organization is by looking at employee engagement survey results. If the staff like their direct supervisor way more than the higher-ups, it shows their supervisor is likely a we/they leader. This is the person who takes credit for the positive answers and pushes the negative

answers on others.
Here is an exercise to try. Ask each person in management to complete a survey on questions they are receiving from employees and customers. Then bring the group together. Divide into smaller groups and assign questions you received to each group. Ask them to suggest a way to answer these questions. As the activity unfolds, you will likely find that many of the people are not sure how to do so, nor which questions to ask to get clarification. Then collect the answers, tighten up the responses if they need to be better, and create a tool for all managers called â??Frequently Asked Questions and Suggested Responses.â?•
This activity is eye-opening. My experience after many years facilitating these sessions is as follows:
1. There are several questions that itâ??s assumed are being answered a certain way, yet the exercise shows they are not.
2. We/they is often evident.
3. The skill of asking a clarification question is not present. For example, someone makes a statement, â??We need more staff.â?• Instead of giving a quick answer, people donâ??t realize they need to ask, â??Why do you feel that way right now?â?• Or someone makes a generalization like, â??We never have enough supplies.â?• What should follow, but usually doesnâ??t, is, â??Can you help me understand this better? What supplies do you mean? When does this happen?â?•
This leads to a healthy conversation on the need for consistency, the need to provide managers with the correct responses, the need for managers to share questions they are receiving, and the need to be able to respond without we/they.
A frequent question I get from managers is, â??How do I answer a question that I actually do need to run by my supervisor?â?• My response is, â??Say, â??Let me research this and I will get back with you.â??â?• This eliminates we/they and helps the staff see their supervisor in a better light. I have had managers complain that employees bypass them to ask their supervisor questions. This is often because the manager said, â??Let me run this by _____ (their supervisor),â?• so much the staff think, *What the heck, letâ??s cut out the middle person!*
We/they is harmful to all types of cultures. It destroys trust, fosters blame and finger-pointing, and weakens the relationships that allow people to work together productively. It seems clear that we/they is getting worse, not better, in society. Letâ??s be part of the solution. Those organizations and communities that can eliminate we/they will be the most successful moving forward.

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