Dramatically Improving Performance

Q&A WITH MICHAEL LAZAN

ABOUT MICHAEL LAZAN

Michael Lazan, senior vice president of The Arbinger Institute, leads the delivery of Arbinger's programs in Europe and with multinational corporations globally. With more than 20 years of management experience, Michael brings tremendous practical experience to Arbinger's work with organizational clients.

Prior to joining Arbinger, Michael served in the White House under President Reagan, and subsequently held a number of key management positions in the United States and internationally with Procter and Gamble, Pillsbury, and Reckitt-Benckiser.

Michael earned a B.A. from Columbia University, an M.A. from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

The time and energy company managers spend trying to keep their people focused on results is substantial. In fact it is a major resource drain that significantly undermines company performance. Managers must therefore find effective ways to unleash the potential of their people and ensure that they are in sync with their company's visions and objectives. But how?

The answer traditionally comes in the form of training programs. However, many managers understandably feel that they simply cannot afford to divert resources to training and development. But the constraints are not only financial. Managers are just as likely to feel that they cannot afford for their people to miss time in the office in order to attend training. Ironically, it is because of these very constraints that managers must get the most out of each and every one of their employees.

So, if training and development are so important, are managers simply being shortsighted in not investing the necessary time and money in them? No. Most training programs do not lead to real, long-lasting changes in people or business results. Recognizing this, it is understandable that managers are unwilling to invest their scarce resources in this way. The real question is why such programs consistently fail to deliver the desired outcomes.

Training programs and the techniques that they teach are undermined by a poorly-understood but almost universal problem known as "self-deception." The book *Leadership and Self-Deception* describes this problem, explains its cause, details its impact in the workplace, and prescribes a solution for avoiding it.

This phenomenon of self-deception is often diagnosed as resistance. It is the state of having or being a problem and not knowing it. While this state of blindness to our own impact has been called by many names, for the purpose of this discussion, we will simply refer to it as the "inward mindset." What follows is a Q & A with Michael Lazan, Arbinger's senior vice president of Organizational Services, who shares his unique perspective, having worked with countless organizations to enable improvements in organizational performance through a shift to an "outward mindset."

Q. HOW DOES AN INWARD MINDSET HURT ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS?

A. It prevents people from remaining focused on organizational results. In fact, it does precisely the opposite; an inward mindset keeps people focused on themselves and their individual "doings." What makes it truly debilitating is that just about all of us suffer from this problem to at least some extent. This almost universal focus on one's self invites virtually all of the people problems that we commonly see in organizations, including weak teamwork, poor communications, interpersonal and interdepartmental conflict, and a lack of accountability, responsibility, and leadership.

> **The inward mindset invites virtually all of the people problems that we commonly see in organizations including weak teamwork, poor communications, interpersonal and interdepartmental conflict, and a lack of accountability, responsibility, and leadership.**

Q. WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS PROBLEM THAT RENDERS MOST TRAINING PROGRAMS AND PERSONNEL INITIATIVES INEFFECTIVE?

A. Let's say that a company rolls out a training program that teaches techniques for improving communications or another that dramatizes the importance of strong teamwork. Even if the techniques taught are the right ones and the ideas are sound, it is pretty clear that an employee who is focused on himself and his own, personal needs cannot truly implement these strategies effectively. In the same way, an employee's focus on himself means that he can't possibly be focused on the overall objectives and results of his organization.

Q. WHY IS THAT THE CASE?

A. Consider a company with which I am familiar that employs about 130 people. The culture in this company is such that the people are only motivated to "please" their owner. As such, there are a lot of silos, and mid-level managers are basically looking out for themselves and quite often feel threatened by their colleagues or new mid-level managers who might outshine them. Everybody seems to be working for himself and the effectiveness of the middle management is very poor. This has led to low levels of creativity, innovation, and trust, as well as other people problems. The company's owner therefore carries virtually sole responsibility for new ideas and drives them personally. He constantly complains about the lack of independent thinking and vision among his mid-level managers. An even bigger complaint of his is the never-ending cycle of organizational conflict with which he must contend.

Q. HOW IS THAT CYCLE OF CONFLICT RELATED TO THE ISSUE OF MINDSET?

A. The easiest way to answer that is to take the example of this company's operations manager, let's call him "John." John is bothered by the marketing manager, who we'll call "Samuel," and his approach to doing things. As a result of the way Samuel does things, John sees Samuel as a loner, not a team player, and quite unfriendly. So John avoids Samuel, offers him minimal assistance, and complains to others about the way he works. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that Samuel finds John difficult to work with, stubborn, and unwilling to accommodate the needs of others. Now if this is how Samuel sees John, would it invite him to be less of a loner, more of a team player, and friendlier with John? Of course not. In fact, he will most likely do exactly the opposite and exhibit more of the behaviors that bother John. This means that this pattern will spiral downward regressively with no end in sight. John and Samuel are each only able to see how he is right and how the other person is making life difficult. They are both trapped and only able to focus on themselves and how what they are doing is "right and good."

This is a typical pattern in interpersonal conflict at this company. As a result, matters that could be resolved within minutes with a phone call, take days to settle - and only after a chain of emails and, in most cases, with the intervention of the owner himself. The cost of this pattern has been substantial to the company and has encumbered many of the initiatives that they are rolling out for their customers. Unfortunately, this type of pattern is not uncommon in SMEs, as well as larger organizations. In fact, many SMEs have gone under because of these very patterns.

Q. IF I FIND AN INWARD MINDSET WITHIN MY ORGANIZATION, WHAT CAN I DO?

A. The first step is for an organization's leaders and staff to understand the problem and recognize how it is undercutting their individual and collective performance. They must then learn and embed a system that keeps them focused on organizational results so that the occurrences of such patterns can be minimized. More specifically, they need to learn a different way to relate to their customers, coworkers, team members, and managers. This system forces them to focus on results and dramatically improves the quality of the whole range of business decisions, as well as key personnel functions including hiring, firing, and performance appraisals.

Q. IT SOUNDS ALMOST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE. DOES THIS REALLY WORK?

A. I hear that all the time from people when they first hear about our approach. Fortunately, the experience of the organizations that have worked with us is that this is not a fantasy—this approach really works. The approach, Arbinger's unique ability to tranform mindset within organizations through multiple modalities including training, consulting, coaching, and implementation tools, transforms the corporate environment such that the company's effectiveness continually improves. Organizational leaders must become empowered to move forward to realize their vision and goals. This can only be done to the extent that they are able to help their employees avoid being focused on themselves. Our aim is to allow them to do this.

> **Organizational leaders must become empowered to move forward to realize their vision and goals. This can only be done to the extent that they are able to help their employees avoid being focused on themselves.**