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By Eric Lindberg

Management training, not charts and graphs *Program invaluable to future growth*

A very wise man in the staffing industry told me decades ago, “If your company doesn’t grow, it will die.” I took that advice to heart and created a five-year plan with organizational charts and diagrams. But it soon became apparent that one of the most important elements in any company’s growth strategy is preparing your best and brightest people for management roles.

It was 1980 and my 12-year-old firm had four offices with \$2 million in sales. We were ready to grow.

Positive Management Associates, a study group I co-founded in 1973, is made up of 14 leaders in the staffing industry from noncompeting markets across the country who meet twice a year. It was at one of those meetings that we discussed the importance of a formalized manager development program. So I created the management associate program (MAP), a three-day, twice-a-year course designed to identify and groom future leaders in our firm. Anyone employed for at least six months and nominated by his or her supervisor can be considered. We ask them to fill out a confidential form to learn more about them: Their education and employment history, likes and dislikes, perceived strengths and weaknesses, the best position they ever had and why, and their one-, two- and five-year career goals.

After an interview process with me and at least one vice president, we choose about eight employees to participate in the program.

MAP begins Thursday afternoon and runs through Saturday afternoon in our Atlanta corporate offices. We have lively class discussions on leadership concepts and theories, like Maslow’s Theory on Hierarchy of Needs and McGregor’s Theory “X” and “Y,” and learn how to apply them to case studies. Each participant is assigned a book to read and must make a presentation to the class. These range from the classics “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” and “Good to Great” to lesser-known works like “Leadership Lessons of the Navy SEALs,” which was recommended by a manager who was a SEAL. A wine and cheese reception on the first night allows everyone to get to know each other better.

Our vice presidents play a role, sharing their knowledge and experience in sales, situational leadership and finance. One of the members of our board of advisers is an accomplished mergers and acquisitions consultant from London who shares his inspiring global perspective on closing the big deals. We also discuss the history of the company and our short- and long-term plans.

The program concludes with a test, which can take up to three hours to complete. Each person is asked to differentiate between a manager and a leader, list the various styles of leadership and choose the best, and apply the traditional leadership concepts and theories to the challenges and opportunities at MSI. Participants also answer a series of questions related to a fictitious case study.

Each associate nominates who they think contributed most to the program, and that person receives the Peter Drucker award and an autographed copy of Drucker’s book, “Managing for the Future.” I consider Drucker to be the pre-eminent management consultant and was fortunate to have met him years ago.

I grade their class participation, presentations and written test – most achieve a B+ or an A– and I talk with each associate about the results and his or her experience. We are always fine-tuning the program according to the feedback and evaluations we get from the group.

Results

By 1995, our revenue was \$54 million with 50 offices throughout the United States, as well as locations in London, Cyprus and Malta. Today, through a series of acquisitions and divestitures of various divisions, we are a \$30 million company with about 10 offices. The average company tenure of our managers is 15 years. Our 2007 projection is for 40% growth, thanks in a large part to our strong management team.

More than 400 people have participated in MAP over the last 26 years. Each has gotten a much better sense of the company and our commitment to their abilities and aspirations – which results in higher morale, increased loyalty and leaders who can weather the tumultuous storms of the staffing industry.

Through MAP, I get a rare look at each person’s leadership style and, just as important, how they think and reason. The invaluable insight of what’s happening in the trenches helps me make better decisions as I continue to navigate my growing company. ◇

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