

## Workforce Ownership: A Priceless Commodity

### How Do You Make It a Reality?

*by Jon Craighead*

The CEO turns to the consultant and says with frustration, “If only my people would own the business like I do, then we’d have no problems.” The response to this CEO’s complaint might be the counter question, “Why don’t they own the business?”

First, let me clarify the use of the term *own*. I don’t mean ownership as in the name on the building but as, “This is my company.” How do you create this level of ownership within the workforce? In my years of consulting and working across all levels of management, organization size and industries, I’ve found that lack of workforce ownership, whether intended or not, has consistently pointed to ineffective leadership as its source.

The work of building an environment of ownership in the organization requires three essential elements: trust, transparency, and authenticity. Let’s take a look at each and their impact.

**Trust:** In his book *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M. R. Covey writes, “There is one thing that is common to every individual, relationship, team, family, organization, nation, economy, and civilization throughout the world – one thing which, if removed, will destroy the most powerful government, the most successful business, the most thriving economy, the most influential leadership, the greatest friendship, the strongest character, the deepest love.... That one thing is trust.” If you read the newspapers today it’s easy to see that there is general distrust of our major institutions – government, wall street, banks, political leaders, and even our closest relationships. And even when reparations are made to mend these breaches, trust is never fully restored to its original state. The integrity of the relationship is compromised when people cease to honor their word, and when that is absent what’s left is suspicion and doubt. As Warren Bennis of Stanford University noted in a recent article entitled *Crisis Revealed: The Quality of Leadership*: “The follower who discovers he has been lied to is never the same.” There just is no substitute for a trusting relationship.

**Transparency** means full, accurate, and timely disclosure of information. Now, I realize a small portion of knowledge must by law be restricted or limited. However, as Jack Welch has pointed out in his book *Winning*: “For some people, becoming a leader can be a real power trip. They relish the feeling of control over both people and

information, and so they keep secrets, reveal little of their thinking about people and their performance, and hoard what they know about the business and its future. This kind of behavior certainly establishes the leaders as boss, but it drains trust right out of a team.” When the industrial age began many years ago, a small band of leaders were greatly outnumbered by a large workforce of skilled and unskilled workers. Withholding information was one of the ways to exert control over those workers; the less information available, the more dependent they were. Today young people graduate from college prepared to be an immediate force in the organization, and they come on the scene chomping at the bit to get to work and make a contribution. Isn’t this what we paid all that money in tuition and dental care for? Yet in many organizations they are expected to wait and watch, rather than being included as essential players in building the future of the enterprise. You cannot expect people to bring ownership when they have minimal information and input.

**Authenticity** provides the foundation for sound partnerships. It ties in all the human characteristics that we look for in each other all the time. Consistency of character is a stabilizing force; it allows us to anchor ourselves to a reliable reality, which in turn allows us to take risks. Consider the catcher on a trapeze team: it doesn’t matter how good he looks, what he says, whether he’s friendly and smiles – all that matters to the jumpers is the confidence that he will be there when they let go. The leader who honors people, sincerely listens, admits mistakes, and is a learner and in the game elicits an admiration and loyalty that is both inspiring and priceless. In upholding such a level of authenticity, this leader is surrounded by a bevy of partners who would go through fire to be by his or her side. The good news is that we all have the capacity to be this kind of leader.

Turning back to the exasperated CEO, it is useful to remember the OTHER golden rule: *When you point a finger at someone, there are always four fingers pointing back at you.*