Catching the Wave

by Dr. Liz Stewart

Values and Work Ethics

The importance of values in the workplace has long been receiving attention. A frequent management lament is that "the new breed of employee does not have the same work ethic we do".

Managing workers in times of change requires a greater understanding of individual value systems. It isn't that the values are missing, but rather that they are different.

A primary reason for this difference seems to me to be a result of the shift in the relationship between an organization and an employee. For years the employee has felt that if he performs well, he will be rewarded by his employer. He will be promoted, increasingly compensated, and provided with a comfortable retirement income.

The reality today is that external pressures may dictate that even those employees who perform well may not be automatically rewarded. There are more unknowns and many greater externally-driven decisions than ever before. Therefore, even the ability to guarantee employment is gone.

The sense that an employer is not willing or able to "look out for" employees has led to an employee belief that he is his own best chance for survival. This new value system is known as "Me, Inc.". Employees today may feel that they must prepare for any contingency rather than depend on the employer for protection. This has fostered a diminished sense of loyalty. It is that reduced loyalty that I believe is seen as a reduced work ethic.

This means that the manager today must manage the whole person, must constantly reinforce the values and work ethics of the organization and always show a connection to and a balance with the individual systems. In this day of mergers and alliances, the employer must form internal alliances with employees.

One key process is creating a development partnership. This is a process of blending the individual and organizational values. Fundamentally, it is simply that the employee understands what the organization values and that his own needs are taken into account.

The three key steps are:

1. Identifying the skills and behaviors necessary to appropriately represent the organizational values and work ethics.

2. Understanding the employee's goals and expectations, strengths and weaknesses.

3. Developing a plan to enhance appropriate skills, capitalizing on existing skills, and connecting the use of these skills to his goals and values.

The operative premise in implementing this development plan is that it makes sense to the employee and that he sees the personal value.