



Trying to Herd Cats

By Chanon Collins

Every manager in the business world has had moments of terror, futility, and exhaustion, when trying to manage and guide his or her work force. Several clichés have been coined to convey the experience – nailing Jello to a tree, pushing string across a table, or the most common one, herding cats.

Any species of felines is difficult to herd just as the eclectic collection of team members can be difficult to manage in a professional organization. Patrick McKenna and Gerry Riskin, former Canadian solicitors, have penned a handbook with seventeen guidelines to “herding cats.”

Their text, entitled **Herding Cats**, offers pragmatic advice for managers wishing to motivate and guide their teams toward success. Rule 1 states that leaders should set examples for their team members. Riskin and McKenna believe that if “at the end of the day, you haven’t helped other improve, you’ve wasted your time.” The leader must have a focus to guide the team. Rule 2 involves knowing your team members. This does not mean that you need to have a social hour each day to learn the favorite color and song of each team member. Create discussions focusing on each team member’s burning passion and personal agenda.

Rule 3 revolves around embracing change. Riskin explains this charge by recalling that “no one’s blood was ever stirred by a leader who stood in front of the troops and said, ‘Let’s dare to be conservative!’” Being a proactive advocate for change is a strong motivator. Rules 4 and 5 require action by the leader – being an example and participating in collaborative activities. Collaborative meetings should reenergize and refocus and provide examples for future successes.

McKenna and Riskin suggest avoiding quick fixes but achieve hard results in a hurry for Rules 6 and 7. Small victories are needed to maintain stamina and focus productivity. Rules 8 and 9 might seem insulting, but it is amazing how many managers fail to follow them – each team member needs to be informed and communication is key. Never assume that anyone knows something has not be clearly communicated. Nothing is more destructive than weak lines of communication and poorly informed team members.

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There are those who believe that sweating the small stuff is a waste of time – Riskin and McKenna are not in this group. Rule 10 focuses on the small stuff because they believe that if a manager pays attention to something, it will be perceived as important.

The remaining rules fall into a category that might be disturbing to some managers. Riskin and McKenna believe that managers should focus on innovating, not fixing problems. If people are absorbed with fixing a problem, they will not be open to the possibilities beyond. Rule 12 urges managers to build their skills inventory. Intelligence is a commodity and it must be maintained.

Imagine abandoning the bottom 10% of your business base every other year. In order to effectively herd cats, managers must encourage continuous abandonment. Rule 14 should be taken to heart by every manager in a business – avoid tolerating mediocrity. There is nothing more detrimental to other team members than one with a lackadaisical work ethic. Managers should address this issue immediately before it begins to erode the cohesive nature of the team.

Managers should also focus on removing obstacles and offering generous amounts of recognition to drive the team. McKenna and Riskin believe that cheerleading is a large part of being a manager – don't forget to celebrate accomplishments.

As you enter your next team meeting, remember these words from former Notre Dame football coach, Lou Holtz – “It is not my job to motivate players. It is my job not to demotivate them.”

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