

Mindset Matters: Are You an Owner or a Tourist?

Career Development

Employment and Labor





Anyone who has ever tried to build or manage a team knows that attitude is every bit as important, if not more, as ability. There is plenty of research showing that toxic employees can pull down an entire organization. These are the bad apples who drain a team's energy and morale and poison your culture.

But an even more destructive problem exists that gets far less attention. If outright negativity is the tip of the iceberg, then apathy and detachment are the great mass of ice lurking under the surface. In my experience, there are relatively few people in any organization who are actively undermining the team, and they can be spotted relatively easily. There are far, far more who simply fail to engage, and they can be exceedingly well camouflaged.

I think of these employees as tourists. They have no ill intentions. They often mean well. They may even think of themselves as solid performers, diligent and conscientious in their own way. They typically do their job but will not take a single step outside of their role or willingly take on new challenges. They need clear and direct instructions before they act. This is a problem for the overall health of a complex organization.

Have you have ever been in a store or restaurant when someone spills a drink on the floor? These are the employees who look on without taking action. "That's not my job! I'm the cashier." "Someone should really get that." "What time does my shift end?" Meanwhile, customers are stepping around the mess.

Tourists no one wants

I have been in organizations that have a lot of tourists. There are lots of little tip-offs: If someone drains the coffee pot, does he take the 60 seconds to reload it, or just walk away? If someone jams the copier or uses the last sheet of paper, does he fix or refill it, or skulk out? Have you ever heard someone in a group meeting say, “I don’t need to know this,” and tune out?

When a substantial portion of your team takes this “not my problem” attitude, it will infect the organization and cause a slow downward spiral that is nearly impossible to stop. The only type of business where this “stay in your lane” approach won’t cause serious damage is one where (1) it is predictable to the point of being mundane, (2) innovation is not a priority, and (3) the likelihood of disruption to your business model is remote.

Go back and read that last sentence again. In 2020, when the lifespan of a Fortune 500 company has never been shorter, when digital transformation is a top priority for every industry, and when virtually every business has to change and reinvent itself, what workplace meets that description? Even the most clichéd tourist traps — the US Post Office and the Internal Revenue Service — are transforming. Whatever your role, whatever your industry, whatever your seniority, the capacity to handle new situations and to embrace change is now essential.

Some employers are using novel ways to spot tourists before hiring them. Hubspot interviewers will observe to see whether an interviewee disposes of a small item, usually a used coffee cup, or leaves the trash for someone else to clean up. Zappos arranges for candidates’ travel from the airport to their office and will have the van driver subtly observe their behavior. No one is hired who doesn’t treat the driver well or interact appropriately with other candidates. A candidate screening company sometimes uses the “candy wrapper test,” leaving a candy wrapper just outside the interview room. They want to see if the candidate will just ignore it or pick up and dispose of it.

Try to spread an owner’s mindset

Over time, tourists will erode your team’s willpower and creativity. They may not send your best employees streaming for the exits, but may make them think: “What’s the point? Why am I trying so hard?” When you tolerate tourists, your stars will start wondering if they should ease back as well. The corrosion builds up slowly over time and by the time the problem is clearly identified, it may be too late.

The good news is that passive employees, unlike outright toxic ones, can be turned around. A lot of times they are intelligent, talented people who have allowed themselves to become static. If you can help them step out of their self-imposed limits, you may discover hidden depths in your tourists. If you can foster a culture that values creativity, risk, and initiative, the whole team may start responding in new ways.

Just as passivity is infectious, so is proactivity. This is the “owner’s mindset,” the idea that whatever happens, I have a stake in making it successful. I don’t start by asking “Is that my job?” — I start by trying to contribute to and improve the situation. It is a small shift that yields big results. It is something that happens at the individual level, within each teammate’s psyche, and gains momentum as it spreads across the organization.

When I talk about how important attitude is to the team, this is really what I have in mind. Of course I want smart and talented employees. But all the intelligence and skill in the world is next to useless if the employee does not put it to use in service to the team.

The bottom line: I want a team of owners, dedicated to the mission, to innovation, and to each other. That is an unstoppable combination. We may not always get it right, but we will take on every challenge and come out better on the other side. That’s a team that anyone can be proud of.

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