

# Executive **EDGE**

## TRADING BAD ADVICE FOR GOOD

Today, as U.S. health care continues to go through radical changes, its leaders must make quick and accurate decisions. To this end, they must learn to forget bits of advice that once sounded wise but are in fact shortsighted. Here are eight examples:

*"When you get good people, keep 'em!"* On the contrary, a top-notch manager helps talented employees move on to higher levels. Among other bene-

*"Small is beautiful!"* This truism is not necessarily always the case. Big organizations, if they are *focused* on what needs to be done, can accomplish more than small ones.

*"High tech is critical to your success."* Mere possession of high-tech equipment accomplishes nothing; indeed, it can be destructive if no one knows how to use it. Effective leaders comprehend high tech and have a

plan for its use.

*"Be objective."* Western culture encourages people to think dispassionately about the problems they face. But serious decisions invariably involve emotions. Good leaders honestly factor feelings into the decisions they make.

*From Ronald J. Stupak and Ronald Greisler, "Unlearning Lousy Advice," Health Forum Journal, September-October 2000, pp. 38-40.*



fits, this practice ensures that the company always has a new generation of leaders.

*"Change takes time."* The truth is that effective change is usually done quickly; incremental change too often dwindles away. That being so, leaders should inculcate a certain restlessness in employees, making them eager for change.

*"Stay a 'hands-on' manager."* The problem with "hands-on" managers is that they tend to be mired in tactical, technical, and short-range concerns. To be fully effective, a manager needs a strategic, high-altitude, long-range perspective.

*"If it ain't broke, don't fix it!"* Nowadays leaders especially need *courage*—sometimes the courage to replace merely functional processes with ones that perform at a higher level.

*"Continue to do more with less."* This dangerous piece of advice actually encourages leaders to "make do," instead of thinking creatively.

## GETTING THE MOST FROM FLAWED STARS

Every manager has at least one worker who, although talented, has a deep-rooted psychological flaw that makes getting along with him or her difficult. A wise manager, realizing that such "bad habits" cannot be wished away, must decide either to fire the flawed worker or—especially if the worker is valuable—help him or her bring the bad habit under control.

Flawed employees tend to be one of six types, each susceptible to a certain kind of handling:

- *The Hero* This employee type gets more work done than do others. Unfortunately, he tends to push himself and his coworkers too hard. To change this behavior, the manager should first praise the employee's efforts—but then quickly warn him of the costs of burnout. The manager should teach the hero how to recognize stress, both in himself and in his colleagues. The point is to turn down the hero's volume, not turn it off.

- *The Meritocrat* This person is an "idealist" who refuses to compromise her "ideals" by recognizing organizational reality. As a result, she sometimes winds up sabotaging her own career by alienating those around her. A wise manager will, first, help the meritocrat see the value of negotiation and compromise, and, second, encourage

her to behave effectively. Having experienced success, she will probably come to like it.

- *The Bulldozer* An employee of this type alienates coworkers by pushing them around. Just to get the bulldozer's attention, his manager may first have to threaten to fire him. Then the manager must persuade the flawed star, first, to make amends to those he has offended and, second, to learn to control his impulse to push people around.

- *The Pessimist* This abnormally fearful person inevitably sees the downside of every business proposal. To change her behavior, a manager must first convince her that standing pat is risky too.

- *The Rebel* A chronic complainer, this worker corrodes colleagues' morale. His manager should force him to put his money where his mouth is by taking responsibility for a constructive change initiative.

- *The Home Run Hitter* This person simply tries too hard. But her manager can reassure her by demonstrating that a series of apparently small but steady successes will, over time, add up to a brilliant career.

*From James Waldroop and Timothy Butler, "Managing Away Bad Habits," Harvard Business Review, September-October, pp. 89-98.*