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"Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."

- Aristotle, Philosopher

Career Prospects, Inc. is a for-profit company committed to improving the economic prospects of Maine citizens by improving the linkages between education and workforce development.

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Education Works!

Electric Fence Management

By Tom Broussard

All too often we manage people in much the same way we train our pets. The electric or "invisible" dog fence is a perfect metaphor for how we train too many employees. It was not all that long ago that obedience in employees was a highly valued trait. Employees were told exactly what, when, where and how to do a job and they did it. But that world is fast disappearing. Now we want these same employees to figure out for themselves what, when, where and how to do a job and then do it. Where once we valued obedience, now we value initiative.

The trouble is while we say that we value initiative, we have not learned how to accept it. We act as if obedience is still the goal and we use the same old tool—the only tool many of us have ever known—the electric fence. It is much easier to tell someone that they have done something wrong than to tell them how to do it right. This is further

complicated by the fact that there are many paths to "doing it right" in the modern workplace.

We tell people every day to "take the initiative" and "take risks". Yet when they do, they get their head handed to them. We encourage people to take risks and then administer the equivalent of an electric shock when they have gone too far or "crossed the line". We don't tell them the line is there. We do not give them instructions for what

"taking a risk" might mean. We just let them go and let the fence do its job. This is how we train dogs and it works the same way

for humans too.

When a dog comes too close to the fence and gets a shock or two, he stays away. He has learned that it hurts if he gets too close. He doesn't know why. He doesn't have to know why. All he knows is that if he goes past that place in the yard where he buried his favorite bone, he gets a jolt. The dog has learned where it is safe.



People learn what is safe and they learn what isn't too. No matter what you tell your employees about taking risks, if they only hear what they did wrong after they do it, they retreat to a safe place. A safe place for employees is a place without initiative where they will not have to take risks.

Management fads seem to come and go as routinely as clothes fashions. And by the time they fade their messages have been reduced to an alphabet soup of letters that have become ubiquitous labels for various management styles or personality types.

For example, the MBWA management style left us with several interpretations of the same acronym. Management by Walking Around, Management by Wandering Around or even Management by Wondering Aloud! (OK, I made that last one up but it sounds good.)

The Myers-Briggs test may be the best known of the personality type labels. License plates (such as ENFP or ISTJ) announce to the world the driver's interest in getting to know you better (or not.)

I am not going to argue for fewer fads or management acronyms. I am actually here to add one more to your list.

Over the years we have all heard one management guru or another

touting the same message. "Think outside the box." "Get out of your comfort zone." "Take risks." "Fail forward." I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out why, for all the exhortations to do so, this particular message doesn't seem to stick. MBEF is why.

MBEF (or Management By Electric Fence) is what keeps people inside their box. MBEF is what keeps people in their comfort zone. MBEF keeps people from taking risks.

When you fault people for having an idea or an approach that you don't like, you don't just kill that idea, you kill an entire generation of ideas.

You may have even killed the idea

What many managers do not understand is that their employee's risk is *their* risk. In order for one level of employee to take a risk and learn what can be learned from the experience, the next level of management must be able to tolerate that risk as well.

So when you tell someone to get something done and depend on them to figure it out, you must realize that the agreement is not that they will do it your way. The agreement is that no matter how they do it, you treat them and the outcome as if it were *your* work, *your* risk, and *your* results. If they make an "error" then it is *your* error. If they try

something new and it doesn't work, then *you* have tried something new and it didn't work. You cannot ask someone to take the risk of inventing something, complain that they did it wrong and then expect them to take that risk again. They will stop taking risks...and these are risks with a small "r".

There are big risks and there are small risks. The risks I am talking about here are small "r" risks. Our employees will NEVER get to point of taking

large risks while even their baby steps are criticized.

When you fault people for having an idea or an approach that you don't happen to agree with, you don't just kill that idea, you kill an entire generation of ideas.

You may have even killed the idea of having ideas.

I am not saying that all ideas are great or that some aren't just plain wrong. But you as the manager or supervisor must know the difference and communicate that difference carefully, thoughtfully, and appreciatively.

Otherwise you are likely to learn one more thing you can learn from the animals--don't bite the hand that feeds you.