



turning managers into leaders

Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – December 2008

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji turns managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and facilitated workshops, she gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403-605-4756

When the annual X'mas party isn't JUST a party

These past few weeks, I heard from three employees in different companies and different industries with an eerily similar protest – about the cancellation of the company's Christmas party. Interestingly enough, the reasons given for canceling the party have been different – one company nixed theirs due to the current state of the economy, another cancelled it because they recently laid off a large portion of their workforce and felt it was inappropriate to have a large party so soon after, and the third dropped it because they felt that the money could be better channeled towards a charitable cause. But the resemblance in conversations wasn't just in topic. In fact, the tone of all three conversations was also identical – strongly and intensely negative! So negative that in the third situation, it crossed over into cynicism and distrust: employees figured that the charitable donation was just a ruse to get out of having the party. "This year, donation but no party, next year, no donation and no party," said one skeptical staffer.

Turns out that the annual Christmas party isn't just a party, in reality it's a statement about something much bigger. Apparently a large majority of employees actually view the party as an unspoken symbol of how much they are valued by their employer. Evidently the annual Christmas "do" is seen by the folks in the trenches as a giant gesture of thanks for their hard work and effort over the past year. Turns out that what may seem like *just* a party is actually an organizational tradition that carries a symbolism far greater than the obvious. True, leaders have to make difficult financial decisions, and that is even more so in today's tough economic environment. But don't make the mistake of thinking that it's just about expense items in a budget. Granted, no company will last very long if you don't mind the money, but when you have to slash dollars, understand exactly what you're cutting. An X'mas party may seem like a frivolous expense and therefore easily eliminated, but take the time to understand the symbolism behind your company's rituals. Otherwise you'll end up with unintended consequences such as poor morale and employee discontent. At times like these, it may be better to cut elsewhere.