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## The *Power* of Availability

by John P. Foppe

Visions are not translated into outcomes unless employees internalize the core idea and become readily available to execute outcomes. Internalizing the vision means being the vision – living it out in everyday work habits, including sharing it with coworkers unsolicited. When employees embody a company’s vision in this way, they make things happen.

Consider the experience of a large Midwest staffing firm: A few years ago, personal attention to employees and focus on sensible training yielded big dividends – income skyrocketed. Then, in June 2004, the company’s third largest client went bankrupt, leaving the firm with an “unbelievable, uncollectible debt,” according to its founder. This was not the end, though, as it would have been for many companies.

“Because we had implemented open-book management,” said the company founder, “I called everybody together and said, ‘Here’s the bad news. I’m not going to sugarcoat it. We are this far in debt, and we’ve never before earned that amount in profit in a year.’”

He then spoke frankly about a plan to get back on track, which included temporarily eliminating raises and bonuses, as well as reducing healthcare benefits. Like a battlefield commander leading what might be his final charge, he then made one final pledge to his employees. “I’m not throwing in the towel,” he said. “I still think we have a great company.” The founder looked around and, to his delight, everyone wanted to be part of the solution.

By February 2005, they had fought well and won. Through perseverance, hard work and personal sacrifice, they had paid off their “unbelievable, uncollectible debt.”

### APATHY VS. AVAILABILITY

Success stories like the one from the staffing firm are rare but uncomplicated if you understand the power of availability. When people are available, the company’s vision is not lost in the mire of earning paychecks or the frustration of looming setbacks. The vision is a living organism, breathing life into each activity every day.

People work – because they see themselves as part of an important solution. Said another way, they see that without their help, something important to them might die.

The flipside, and unfortunately the more common status quo, is apathy. This occurs when people perceive themselves as having little-to-no effect on a company’s success or failure. Instead of being available, they check out. Many employees are detached from the company’s path and its larger picture. As a result, pay and benefits become their only reasons for being. If those aren’t at least satisfactory, and in many cases they aren’t, people become uncommitted and permanent prey to better job opportunities. Meanwhile, they put in their time, pick up their paychecks and do enough to avoid being fired. The key to turning such employees around is transitioning them from their apathetic state to a place of availability, where both potential and hardship are seen as an opportunity to get involved and excel.

### THE PRACTICES OF AVAILABILITY

In order to capitalize on the power of availability, it is important to consistently use five identifiable practices. They are:

- **Practice #1: Being Apparent** – When the founder introduced his staffing firm to an open book policy, he progressively changed his people’s experience. First, they were no longer in the dark as to the company’s path, which did two things: increased awareness of looming successes and failures, and introduced personal accountability into their daily activities. Workers perceived a greater sense of security - even if the news was not good. The state of the union was apparent to them. This also bred a culture of trust, and changed their reactions to the requirements of their positions. They were willing to take ownership. Then, when the company was able to fight through its difficult season, the people experienced, firsthand, the result of their new perceptions and reactions. In short, their experience verified the power of increased availability.
- **Practice # 2: Being Accessible** – Training programs at

a California-based construction materials supplier have turned heads and solidified worker loyalty. Here's a case in point: When the company discovered several of its employees were dyslexic, it brought in a special instructor to work with them. After finishing the program, one worker was able to write out a check, for the first time in his life, to his grandson. Said one long-time employee, "When you think about loyalty from an organization, loyalty like that goes far beyond a paycheck."

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By making its leadership and resources accessible to workers, the company sets the ground rules for loyalty. Workers still have a choice, but the company's low turnover and consistent profits rely on the principle of reciprocity.

• **Practice #3: Being Approachable** – Typical hierarchical relationships make this practice of availability rare, but the companies who implement it raise their ceiling of potential through the stratosphere. One attorney at a federal agency experienced this first-hand. He managed a group of promising young attorneys who either still had large school debts or faced starving marriages from the strain of the profession. The managing attorney's position (and reputation) afforded him the right to crack the whip, but something in his gut turned him a different direction. He called each attorney into his office and said nothing about work. Instead, he asked them about their families, feelings and aspirations. He learned things he never knew and his staff experienced great relief in knowing they worked for a boss who cared about them. Ultimately, the managing attorney's ability to foster approachability increased the younger attorneys' willingness to be available when the agency or another co-worker needed something from them.

• **Practice #4: Being Authentic** – Authenticity breeds the greatest culture of trust. Here's an example. According to the *Washington Post's* "Devil Employees" blog dated July 21, 2006, a woman received permission to telecommute three days a week. Six months into her telecommuting, she attended a review with her boss who asked her how the new arrangement was working out. She explained how productive she was from home. She didn't realize, however, that the boss knew otherwise. As it turned out, when a telecommuter dialed in to the company system remotely, a different password was required. Just before the six-month review, the IT department phoned the woman's boss to ask why she never logged in with the

remote password. She was subsequently fired.

The importance of fostering a culture of authenticity is that it creates a perception among co-workers that the sneaky, lazy, backstabbing employees won't go unnoticed. No one wants to be a snitch, and few are, but when a company assures the authenticity reigns, its people sense and experience a fair environment in which to be available.

• **Practice #5: Being Accountable** – According to the CEO of a prominent builder, at many workplaces a parent-child relationship is fostered. This does not encourage worker availability. The CEO's strategy? Instead of spending money on a quality control department, his company asks workers to track their own results. This system provides each employee with the tracking tools and proper training to use them. As testimony to the collective power of nearly 800 employees constantly looking for ways to improve their work, the company has won multiple industry, community and national awards for its quality.

When a company removes the babysitter perception from its employees' minds and treats them as responsible adults, something surprising happens. They begin to act like responsible adults.

#### **SIMPLE BUT NOT EASY**

As a manager, conveying the practices of availability is not as easy as persuading your people to change their ways or as straightforward as exemplifying the practices yourself. Most managers get bogged down in recasting a vision or reintroducing their people to the worthiness of the company. Neither works because workers become apathetic through a cycle of reinforced perceptions and reactions that have created a habit of routine. To break through, a new cycle must not only be introduced but also reinforced through new experiences.

Creating a greater level of availability in your company requires some ingenuity, flexibility and an acknowledgement that seeing a vision through to its grand outcome has everything to do with reframing and reinforcing the right perceptions, reactions and practices. When your company practices availability, people no longer let things happen. They put themselves in a place where they can make them happen.

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*Born without arms, John Foppe speaks, coaches and trains on how to maintain momentum when executing initiatives and translate visions into outcomes. He is the CEO of Visionary Velocity Worldwide. For more information, visit [www.visionaryvelocity.com](http://www.visionaryvelocity.com).*