

“Attend this Workshop and Save \$50,000
GUARANTEED!”

By Stephen B. Friedheim, Education Systems & Solutions

A few years ago I was discussing the value of workshops and seminars with my friend Stuart, who had a couple of small schools in Virginia. We agreed that there were lots of opportunities each year to attend them, but that the value, credibility, and relevance was often suspect. More often than not, these experiences rated a “C-” and rarely an “A+”.

He recalled one that he learned about from a full-color brochure he received that carried the caption you see above. Inside were attractive pictures of a major Boca Raton, Florida, hotel, featuring scenes of the golf course, tennis courts, beach, and spa. The advertised seminar was to be held over a weekend when the weather in Virginia was predicted to be chilly, at best. The warm climate of Florida had a lot of appeal.

The registration fee was a “bit steep,” he reported at \$10,000 per person; however, considering the guarantee of saving \$50,000, it sounded like a pretty good return on the investment.

He was captivated by the personal endorsements of people who had attended this session in the past. Although he did not personally know any of the names of the commentators, he did recognize the companies they represented. They were nationally and internationally known brand-name organizations.

“This was the finest seminar I ever attended,” one said. “It’s been five years and I am still reaping the benefits of this seminar,” another announced. “I learned the most valuable business lesson of my life at this seminar,” said a third.

That was all Stuart needed; he was convinced he should attend. Besides a couple of days in the sun, a round or two of golf seemed like a great way to spend a tax-deductible weekend. So, he went.

Upon arriving at the hotel, he found an attractive invitation waiting for him to attend a special reception that evening in the ballroom of the hotel for all of those who had registered for the session. He showered and cleaned up; arriving at the reception a few minutes after the reception was scheduled.

He was surprised to discover that there were over 100 people on hand, milling around, chatting, and enjoying the complimentary drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Reviewing their name badges, he discovered that they had come from all over the country, as far away as Hawaii. The general cocktail conversation reflected an excitement about the next day's event. There was eager anticipation of the message of advice to be delivered by the keynoter, who wasn't present for the reception. His staff was there, of course, promoting the value of the session to come without revealing any details.

Morning came; and Stuart reported to the ballroom where he received an attractive, leather portfolio with his name embossed in gold, as well as a pen bearing his name and the name of the presenter with an inscription that read, *a weekend to remember*. The "energy" in the room was high as marching music set the stage for the approaching presentation. Stuart marveled at the excitement; and, as the consummate business person, he calculated the economic consequences of 100 people paying \$10,000 each for this session. "Not bad," he thought.

At the appointed hour, following a fanfare and an offstage introduction, the featured speaker appeared and approached the podium. Tan, relaxed, perfectly attired for a resort, the speaker looked the part of very successful, talented, skilled, corporate guru.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "thank you for coming. I believe that you are here because you are genuinely interested in improving your organization and saving money at the same time. I understand that ambition entirely. I began giving these seminars some years ago when I was given the advice I am going to give you today. It was so powerful, so productive, and so instrumental in my pattern of success, that I felt I

had to spread the word and share experience. If you will take my advice and act on it promptly, you can begin to reap the benefits beginning the very day you return to your places of employment.”

Stuart has his pad and pen at the ready in anticipation of the advice to follow. The speaker had delivered positive, dynamic preface to the day’s event. Stuart liked what he was hearing.

“Here is my advice,” the keynoter continued, “When you return to your offices, I want you to review and carefully consider each member of your staff. Who are they, how long have they been with you, what are their titles, what contribution are they each making to your daily success?”

“I can guarantee you,” he continued, “that at least one of them is not pulling his or her weight on your team. That person is what might be considered a marginal player; not so bad that he’s received a pink slip, but not so good that he’s deserving of a raise. That person has to go, ladies and gentlemen; fire him or her; get that person off your team right now, as soon as you get back. That is my advice and that is the complete content of this seminar. Thank you for coming.”

Well, you can imagine the hubbub that ensued. The audience seemed at first stunned; and, then in disbelief, they looked at one another and voices began to rise in distress and apparent protest. It seemed at the moment like they had paid so much and had gotten so little. Recognizing the tenor of the moment, the guru spoke again.

“I understand your consternation,” he said. “I know that you are equating the tuition for this session with the simplicity of my message. However, I guarantee you that at this very moment you have someone on your staff who is holding you back, is setting a bad example for the other members of your team, and who is occupying space that should be filled by someone who can ‘take the ball and run with it.’ I’ll bet that you are currently paying that person more than \$50,000 a year, probably a lot more than \$50,000 a year.

The more you are paying him or her, the more you will save for having come here today. And I wouldn't be at all surprised to discover that you have more than one of them on your staff. Voila! The value of this seminar just doubled!"

"Now," he continued, "I realize how angry you are at the moment; angry at me; but more, I think, angry at yourself for realizing that I'm right and that my message is so seemingly simple. But it is not simple. If it were simple, you would have let that person go long since. What I have done this morning, is to give you a new incentive, a new reason to begin to rebuild your team by removing a marginal member. You are mad at the moment, which I anticipated. In the next two days, while you are here at this resort, I encourage you to take advantage of all of the amenities that are available, play golf, or tennis, swim, use the weight room and the spa, turn you anger into aggressive exercise. My staff is here to help you sign up for your choices. I do thank you for coming."

And, with that, he left the stage. Several members of his staff appeared at the front of the room with clipboards, ready to assist in facilitating the necessary tee times, etc. Stuart was flabbergasted. He hadn't a clue that this sort of conclusion would present itself less than forty-five minutes into the session. Mad? Yes, he was mad. And during the next couple of days, he would take his anger out on a little round, white ball that probably sailed longer and straighter than any ball he had ever hit off a golf tee!

Stuart swore this story was true; that he really attended the session. I don't know if that's true; but, whatever, there is a significant lesson in the telling; one that is reflective of many episodes in the consulting that Jan and I have been doing with private career colleges and universities around the country.

We have become convinced that one of the major management deficiencies in many of us is to effectively motivate, supervise, and coach personnel for whom we are responsible. The people that the guru in Stuart's story identified were people who apparently weren't performing well in part, I'm sure, because they had not been evaluated and stimulated to be an effective part of the team; and if they had been properly

coached, there wasn't a sufficient improvement in performance to entitle those employees to be retained.

Appropriate supervision begins with a clear understanding of responsibilities as contained in the job description. This understanding is between the employee and the supervisor. Too often, I fear, the simple distribution of the job description serves as the complete or nearly complete understanding process. Obviously, such a process is deficient.

Then the job description has to play an integral role in the annual personnel review process, also a step that too often is either not done or not done effectively. Somehow, too many of us are uncomfortable undertaking this process. The assumption is that is this somehow a confrontational experience rather than a necessary coaching experience creates reluctance on the part of a supervisor to engage in it. As a result, the employee is denied an opportunity to better understand and appreciate the real dimensions of the job that is expected of them; and now knowing them, given time to improve.

Then, perhaps the greatest management sin of all, keeping someone in a job after the necessary and appropriate coaching has been done; and the employee has been given an opportunity to adjust and improve. Too often, we are reluctant to pull the plug and set someone free. More often than not, such an act is a more of a compassionate opportunity to free someone to go on to some other job, rather than career-ending dismissal. If you are displeased with the performance of an employee, you can be assured that that message has been conveyed either verbally or subliminally in one way or another. The employee knows and is probably as uncomfortable as you are. At the same time, other employees are aware that the offending member of the staff is not pulling their weight, making it necessary for others to pick up the slack. Morale is bound to suffer.

While care must be taken in dismissing a person, it should be done sooner rather than later. Marginal employees are a detrimental drain on the organization. Careful

hiring, deliberate indoctrination of the job responsibilities, appropriate coaching on a regular and consistent basis, are all parts of building and maintaining an effective team.

You can benefit as Stuart did without paying \$10,000; start the employee evaluation process this very minute; the minute you finish this article. Stuart went back to Virginia, by the way, and did dismiss the person on his staff who was least effective and productive; someone who Stuart had been reluctant to dismiss. And having done so, he felt so much better; it justified his weekend in Florida.