How to change the 'us vs. them' mentality in corporate culture.
Richard Branson | December 15, 2010

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Of all the grammatical slips that really bother me, few compare to an improperly used "they."

You ask a salesperson for an item and he says, "Sorry, they decided not to carry that brand any more." Or just as you arrive at an airport terminal, an airline agent tells you, "They have just announced a one-hour delay."

This mysterious unnamed group, "they," is held responsible for untold problems. Bad news tends to be delivered in the third-person plural, whereas good news is much more likely to be relayed in the first-person singular. (I wish my old English teacher could read this, as he was convinced I never listened to him!)

So if the requested item is in stock, the salesperson will likely reply, "Yes, I have that." When a flight is on time, the agent will say, "I would like to announce the on-time departure of flight 123."

Managers and business leaders should watch for this tendency. A company where the staff consistently overuses the word "they" is a company with problems. If employees aren't associating themselves with their company by using "we," it is a sign that people up and down the chain of command aren't communicating -- and if that turns out to be the case, you'll usually find secondary problems throughout the company, affecting everything from development to customer service.

A company's employees are its greatest asset, particularly in service-based operations where your people are your product. When a company fails to grasp this simple business tenet, the result is invariably an oppositional "us and them" divide between management and front-line staff.

Listen for complaints from the front line such as, "They (management) are a bunch of idiots who never ask for our opinion on anything," or, "If they had only asked us, we would have told them that their new square peg doesn't fit the round hole we operate in!"

Meanwhile, from managers and executives, you might hear: "They (employees) just don't seem to get it. Don't they know that square pegs are all the rage with our customers these days?"

Two wrongs have never made a right, and these two conflicting they's will never make a "we."

Resolving the underlying issue is pretty simple. If employees feel they are on the outside looking in -- so far outside that they refer to their company as "they" -- then who's to blame? Managers and executives may be investing no effort in making staffers feel like valued insiders. For example, try asking employees where they learn about new products and other important
company news. If the answer is the newspapers or a next-door neighbor, then they are truly stuck in a "they say" situation.

In my experience, middle management is a good place to look for the source of the problem. Feedback from up and down the chain often hits a wall in the person of a midlevel manager who has fallen victim to the "knowledge is power" syndrome. Identifying such blockages and unclogging corporate arteries will bring huge payoffs.

In involving every employee group in development not only drives better product design but also provides the added impetus of a huge pride of association factor: "We came up with this as a team." Everyone wins, including customers and shareholders.

This "us and them" problem is endemic to corporate life, so business leaders can expect to work on it throughout their careers. I sometimes come across it even in Virgin companies. When someone on our team tells me, "Sorry, Mr. Branson, but they don't let us do that any more," my standard response is, "'They'? Oh, I'm sorry, I mistook you for someone who works here." Tough love, maybe, but it certainly gets the point across!

This problem is exacerbated by our reliance on impersonal communications technologies. One of a leader's greatest challenges these days is getting people to actually talk to each other; one-on-one meetings and old-fashioned brainstorming are vital to the success of any growing business. Improving the flow of information is just one part of the communications challenge; getting employees to actually listen to each other is much more difficult. A big part of the problem is that the only word that gets more play than "they" is "I." But we'll talk about that another day.