

The Cicada Syndrome

Working The Bugs Out

By Kendall C. Wright, President of Entelechy Training and Development, Inc.

Having lived and work the majority of my life in southwestern Ohio, I am intimately aware of the cyclical infestation of the cicada. There is nothing quite like the cicada's assault on the senses - sight (ugly), hearing (loud), touch (creepy), and even taste (yes, there is a cicada cookbook). I'm content to take the word of others regarding the cicada's palate appeal. So while the birds, amphibians, and a few very human beings gorge themselves on the boisterous interlopers, I, like most everyone else, simply endure their onslaught.

For those lucky few who may not be familiar with the cicada, the name is most fitting. Cicada is Latin for buzzer. Cicadas belong to the order Hemiptera, which includes more than 80,000 species. Interesting, members of this order are referred to as the true bugs. Certain species of cicada are among the longest living of all the insects, in fact, only the queen termite lives longer. These cicadas lie dormant in an incredible state of hibernation for 17 years, and then in a massive flurry of activity, they awaken, swarm, breed, and die all in a short 4-5 month period.

Oddly, many organizations have employees whose behaviors resemble those of the cicada. These employees simply disappear or become non-contributors for extended periods of time, as if in a form of hibernation. Their hibernation is induced as a possible consequence of being excluded from the team dynamic, or maybe having been slighted in some way by the supervisor. It is even possible that these employees feel they have been the victims of some type of discrimination. No matter the reason, these employees insulate and isolate themselves from the dealings of the group, and have only a cursory level of interaction. This pattern of behaviors is called the Cicada Syndrome.

During their hibernation these employees appear to be dead to the world. They don't share their ideas, insights, or innovations. As a result, the team's levels of creativity, productivity, and profitability are adversely impacted. It's only at the exit interview that the leader becomes fully aware of the suggestions and recommendations these employees were storing within their molted skins.

Outlined below are 5 critical tactics to ensure your sphere of influence isn't plagued by the Cicada Syndrome.

Stop Assuming – Assuming everything is ok is a key component of the ecosystem that supports the Cicada Syndrome. Take the time to question your assumptions regarding the experiences of your direct reports. They may not be as comfortable in or with the team environment as they appear to be on the surface.

Be A Facilitator – As you remember from your training on how to conduct an effective meeting – effective meetings are well facilitated meetings. Be a facilitator. The facilitator creates space and time for each participant to offer perspectives and comments. Additionally, the facilitator makes sure those who speak are heard and understood. Ensuring someone plays the role of facilitator minimizes the likelihood of team members feeling overlooked, marginalized, or excluded.

Follow Up – It's always very enlightening and educational to hear the individual's take on the team dynamic and direction. When possible, make a practice of following up with team members after the meeting to get their insights and takeaways. What some team members may be reluctant to offer in a larger group setting, they may freely offer in one-on-one conversation.

Reward Participation – It is a near “universal truth” that what gets rewarded gets repeated. Reward those who participate as a way to encourage others to do the same. The reward can be a simple verbal acknowledge, a word of encouragement, or a thank you. Research supports that what the leader rewards becomes a priority for the direct reports.

Embrace Differing Perspectives And Approaches – By embracing ideas that are different from your own, you free the direct reports to be creative and innovative, instead of being mere clones and impersonators of their leader. Once the direct reports are convinced that they don't have to think just like the leader in order to be perceived as a valued asset, all their talents and insights can be leveraged toward the organizational goals.

These five tactics are highly effective in fostering a more inclusive work environment for all your direct reports. Equally important, these five tactics position the leader to operate from a more proactive posture.

Cicadas are an interesting, even fascinating insect, but having team members mimic the long hibernation cycle of the cicada is just plain bad for business.

Key Lesson For Leaders: Actualizing Leaders understand the importance of an inclusive environment, and they diligently strive to establish and maintain such an environment for their direct reports. As with many challenges to effective leadership, the Cicada Syndrome can only thrive in an environment of ignorance, insensitivity, and incompetence. Don't wait for the cicadas to wake up during the exit interview before you bug-proof your sphere of influence.

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Kendall C. Wright, “The Actualizer,” CEO of Entelechy T&D, Inc., helps business leaders -at all levels- fulfill the hard parts of their job descriptions. He is the author of *Affirming and Confirming SuccessFUL Living* and most recently released *Conversations On Success*, featuring insights from Les Brown, James Kouzes and other top tier international speakers. Find free resources at www.EntelechyCan.com. Contact us at Kendall@EntelechyCan.com or 513.860.4934.