Antidote for raging employee apathy

By BRAD GUYER*

We have read about it; most of us have experienced it, and we’re all interested in finding a way to counter it. I’m talking about employee apathy, which has reached entirely new levels in today’s business climate.

We’ve all seen the news reports: There is a “pervasive” and growing sense of apathy that afflicts the U.S. workforce.

For feed mills, the situation is truly dire. Let’s face it: Our industry is in a firestorm of consolidation, increasing regulation, price volatility and a host of other market forces that make life at the mill not so pleasant anymore.

The other day, I ran over to a local big box store (which will remain nameless because of what I am about to say). I needed a few simple nuts and bolts for a project. After nearly an hour in the store, I finally got someone to help me — that’s how you could describe it. The guy, who allegedly worked in hardware, knew nothing — no idea of what I needed. Honestly, I began to doubt that he had ever even held a hammer.

Finally, after many disappearing acts, he emerged with the “right” parts. When I got home and tried inserting the bolts into the chair I was repairing, I found that they were the wrong length, wrong width, wrong everything. Back to the big box.

The manager stepped in, and presto! The right bolts, washers and nuts appeared magically from a drawer. Profuse apologies were given for the mistake, but not for hiring the guy who obviously was better suited for a GameStop than a hardware store.

Once this got resolved, I had to ask myself, “What the heck is going on here?” I know there is a growing sense of apathy among workers of all stripes, but this has reached a new level of indifference to the customer. I think this new level can best be described as “raging apathy” — complete and total disregard for anything and everything related to work or the customer.

I recently got into the familiar conversation with a customer about how difficult it is to find and retain great talent — something that is increasingly hard to do in a rural setting. To further complicate the situation, mills are under extreme pressure to control costs, so there is a natural inclination to pay workers less. And, as the saying goes, “You get what you pay for.”

What’s scary, though, are the profound issues that under-skilled workers and below-par performance create for a feed mill operation in this crazy environment. The industry is consolidating; everyone knows it and feels it. So, it’s almost a situation of “buy or be bought” to survive.

When there’s capital involved — either raising it to buy or showing it to sell — the mill assets come under a microscope. What that means is that if your operations are deemed subpar, then you won’t get the capital you need to buy or you won’t get the price you want to sell.

Up next on the horizon is Phase I implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), which has animal feed operations squarely in its sights. Among other things, this means that feed mills need to have people on the floor who actually pay attention to what they are doing. Given the high stakes imposed by FSMA, it’s almost too high a price not to have good people.

Does that sound like an A-level calling card to attract the best and the brightest? No so much. In fact, there is a quantifiable shortage of highly skilled workers living in rural communities, which are home to most American feed mills. Couple that with the stiff competition and desirability that comes from big-city employers, and we face a near-crisis situation.

So, what’s a feed mill to do that wants to not just survive but thrive in this upside-down world? Here’s an Rx you might consider as an antidote for apathy.

• Run your mill, but don’t let it run your business. The days of finding excuses not to use advanced tools and capabilities that are readily available to improve your performance are over. Say what you want, but sooner or later (likely very soon), this kind of stuff won’t be optional. Why? Because everything in life runs downstream. In other words, your customers will demand higher-quality products at more competitive prices, or they won’t be your customers for much longer. They’ll want to be assured that your mill is in full compliance with the new FSMA regulations for animal food (coming on line next year), which creates its own set of performance and accountability challenges. If you don’t step up now, you may not be able to catch up later.

• You are your own best benchmark. There are people and solutions available to help you benchmark your feed milling operation against itself. Sound ridiculous? It’s far from that. You are your own best measure to determine how to grow your business, address production bottlenecks and decide how many full-time employees you need and can afford. You may find that by improving efficiency and production, you have more money available to hire better-qualified people.

• Build your brand, because reputation matters most. This is the point at which many people tune out. Does it sound like mumbo-jumbo? What we’re talking about in your world is not slick television advertising and expensive events. We are talking about your reputation — how your business is viewed and what real people are saying about you in the community. That’s a very big deal, and you might want to learn a lesson from your grandpa, who knew full well that reputation is everything.

At the end of the day, this is much more about us owning the work environment and the standards we have created and allow to exist. The ability to attract and retain good talent — maybe even great talent — is in direct proportion to the level of desirability you create and maintain for your mill operation.

Really good people want to work in an environment where they are challenged and can make a difference in the outcome. Those people are willing to accept responsibility. Maybe it’s time that we do, too.