



Photograph by Jacqueline Ramseyer

Psychologist Dr. Philip E. Berghausen has studied behavioral science as a way to understand success.

Berghausen's work spells management success

By I-chun Che

Philip Berghausen's touch has been felt in the business world, the academic world, in cities as close as Sunnyvale and Cupertino and in places as far away as Russia.



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Dr. Berghausen points out a graph that his company, Berghausen Consulting Inc., drew to help explain the cause and effect of an executive's behavior patterns at work.

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Philip Berghausen's touch has been felt in the business world, the academic world, in cities as close as Sunnyvale and Cupertino and in places as far away as Russia. Companies that follow his leadership suggestions have actually won awards as great places to work.

As a behavioral psychologist Berghausen believes good management can prevent problems as small as hiring an unfit employee or as big as the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant catastrophe.

In 1989, Berghausen, then vice chairman of the Human Factors Division of American Nuclear Society, was invited by the former Soviet Union to investigate the Chernobyl incident.

"It was an afterthought for them to invite a behavioral psychologist but we found that the tragedy could have been prevented if there had been better communication between shifts, adequate training of the staff and clear management responsibility," Berghausen, 56, says.

In the early morning of April 26, 1986, the number 4 reactor of Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded when the crew conducted a planned safety test that the staff from the night before had postponed. Nobody from the previous shift had told the early morning staff that the test was put off because the reactors were at low power settings and that conducting such a test could be dangerous under these circumstances. Although the power plant's dispatcher was aware of the

potential dangers, he didn't challenge the operator's decision to conduct the test for fear of offending the operator.

"Managing a power plant is a lot more than the machines," Berghausen says. For the past 20 years, he has worked with numerous private and public organizations to help them achieve their goals through the principles of behavior psychology.

Berghausen got interested in psychology when he worked at Marquette University as assistant director of student activities. He was inspired by one of his coworkers, the director of the university's counseling center.

"He often told me about his work and I became progressively more interested in psychology," Berghausen says.

Berghausen took some courses in psychology at Marquette University and then went to Colorado State University for his graduate studies.

"I particularly liked psychology courses of a quantitative nature," Berghausen says. "These courses provided me with an opportunity to combine my interest in human behavior and my interest in empirical research and measurement."

This is also why Berghausen highly values behavior psychology, which focuses on behaviors that can be observed and measured.

He studies ways to apply principles of behavior psychology in the work place because he has long been interested in human behavior and in the many routes people have taken to become successful.

Berghausen believes good management can not only have prevented the catastrophe that happened in Russia 17 years ago, but can also empower Americans now living with the threat of terrorism.

"In times of crisis, people normally experience four kinds of feelings: lack of trust, fear of the unknown, a need to do something and the urge to talk," he says. "These emotions are closely related. If you are not well informed and there is nothing you can do about it. You feel afraid and helpless."

That's exactly how many people feel every time the White House raises the alert of the Homeland Security Advisory System.

"People feel vulnerable because the government doesn't tell them what kind of threat the intelligence has found and there is basically nothing people can do about the alert," Berghausen says. "Gradually, people become numb and think the government is crying wolf."

Berghausen suggests that the Bush administration make as much information available as possible.

This is what he suggested De Anza College President Martha Kanter do after a student was arrested in January of 2001 for plotting to blow up the campus.

"Martha made sure the information she gave out was accurate. She assured safety but she didn't guarantee safety. She also made sure there were counselors available for students and faculty to talk about their worries. She demonstrated what a great leader should do during times of crisis," Berghausen says.

Berghausen doesn't base his suggestions on reading people's minds or from random opinions. Rather, he approaches a problem with scientific methodology.

"We view ourselves as behavioral scientists and we draw from different disciplines such as anthropology, literature and sociology to solve problems," Berghausen says of his Sunnyvale-based consulting company.

The services his company provides include team-building, executive coaching, specialized training, management style assessments for employee selection and for employee development, employee development programs and strategic planning.

"Most business books focus on what not to do, but Dr. Berghausen helps us find out what motivates people and what a good workplace should be like," says Bruce Woolpert, president and chief executive officer of Graniterock, a Watsonville-based construction company.

"When people talk about business success, they tend to think it is the management's responsibility. But we believe it is every employee's responsibility and that people like to be treated as equal partners and involved as part of the decision-making process," Woolpert says. "People come to work to make a difference in the workplace."

To create a healthy working environment, Granite incorporates Berghausen's management principles and practices at every level of the company.

Every week, Berghausen meets with the company's department heads to understand their concerns. He also conducts coaching seminars to help new managers understand the company's culture. His phone number is listed in the company directory for employees who need to talk to or feel their coworkers need help.

"The telephone conversations are strictly confidential," Woolpert says. "Many management issues are quasi-business and quasi-personal. It is nice to be able to talk to someone who is outside our company but knows our company well. This is especially helpful when people feel unsuccessful and don't know what to do."

According to Woolpert, Berghausen has helped one employee repair his relationship with his teenage son and another employee go through the turmoil of divorce.

"We don't turn a blind eye on our employees' personal problems," Woolpert says.

With Berghausen's help, Graniterock helps each of its 700 employees develop a lifelong learning program, which the company refers to as their individual professional development plan. Each employee is encouraged to take classes in languages, reading or electronics.

"The more training people get, the more they know. The more they know, the more they can make a difference," Woolpert says. "We don't use the word 'supervisor' here. Management is here to facilitate, to optimize people's ability to make a difference."

Throughout the 15 years Graniterock has been working with Berghausen, the company has won wide recognition. In 1992, Graniterock won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the prestigious award for excellence in management. In 2002, Graniterock was one of Fortune magazine's 100 Best companies to work for in America. Graniterock, which ranked 16th, was one of the 28 companies that appeared on the list every year since the ranking's inception in 1998.

Public organizations Berghausen has worked with also benefit from his scientific approach to management.

The cities of Sunnyvale and Saratoga have contracted with Berghausen's consulting company to help them screen candidates for key positions. Applicants have to take an exam first to assess their leadership and management capabilities and then have an oral interview with Berghausen's company before they proceed to have an interview with their future supervisor.

"Dr. Berghausen is very result-oriented," says Sunnyvale City Manager Robert LaSala. "His company's evaluation of the candidates have helped the city prevent bad hiring decisions and saved the city a significant amount of money."

A thorough interview proves to be a win-win situation for both the organization and the individuals.

John Pilger, who started his new job as a public information officer for the city of Sunnyvale three months ago, says the thorough interview process was the main reason he took his current job.

"When people make a job change, they go through a probation time to see if the organization they work for is a good match for them. The organization also goes through a probation time to see if the newly-hired person is a good match for them," Pilger says. "Although I was surprised at first when I heard about the interview process, I was encouraged at the same time because I know the consulting company makes sure the city and I are good match for each other."

Berghausen says he prides himself in helping his clients and making a positive difference in people's life.

"There is no magic in management," Berghausen says. "Treat people as whole human beings. Care about them and invest in their spiritual development because people work for people, not for positions."

(Please note the reporter's account of the Chernobyl event contains some inaccuracies. For more information, please contact the Center for Executive Solutions at info@centerexecsolutions.org.)