



5 August 2011

BUILDING A BETTER WORKPLACE EVEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT IN CHARGE!

Make sure you can say 'YES' to the following eight statements

1. I have a clear written plan for achieving my professional goals over the next year.
2. I have a good understanding of my organisation's business strategy.
3. I am able to make regular, meaningful contributions in my workplace.
4. I am able to contribute clearly and confidently in meetings.
5. I seek out and invest in my own professional development and learning.
6. I have a sound portfolio of influencing skills.
7. I feel my life has a strong sense of meaning, purpose and connection.
8. I believe my life is balanced and healthy.

An attempt to contribute falls flat

Several months ago, we worked with a client organisation where the following situation had occurred. It seemed the company's US-based headquarters had produced a business plan detailing which products were to be discontinued, revised or supported with special marketing budgets. The plan was approved by the North American senior executive team and then rolled out across the company, including the Asia-Pacific region.

But here in Australia the plan was seen as out of touch with local conditions and local preferences. Matt, a fairly new marketing manager, put forward his views in a widely circulated memo. He backed up his position with data collected from a number of customer focus groups. He was certain the merit of his argument would convince but it was rejected in short order. "Get used to it!" he was told by his boss, "This type of thing happens here all the time."

Does this might remind you of places where you've worked?

Have there been times when you've anticipated particular results but you didn't get the traction you were expecting? This may have happened in relation to a particular task or even your career progression in general. In some cases where careers stall, we find that a 'sick' organisation can be a major contributor, as it was for Matt. But surprisingly individuals *can* often do things a little (or even a lot) differently - and achieve much more effective and fulfilling outcomes.

Let's acknowledge that many people find their workplaces quite challenging. Organisations are often not as inclusive as they need to be, if everyone's energy is to be enlisted in a shared endeavour. In some organisations, women can feel that the unwritten rules governing who succeeds and who fails may operate to marginalise their efforts. In fact, anyone seen as 'different' can experience an uncomfortable sense of not fitting the mould. Outsoken (but highly committed) individuals like Matt can feel that their efforts to be innovative and to care are simply not appreciated.

Limiting ideas about what 'talent' looks like

'Merit' is not always an objective measure unfortunately. Ideas about merit can often reflect out-dated stereotypes about what a leader looks like and how a leader should behave. It's not only a bad thing for those who feel marginalised. This type of culture affects the organisation negatively in a number of ways. The bottom line is that it's bad for business. For instance, Matt's company ended up dismissing the very customer insights that might have helped to lift them out of the doldrums. Our research into organisations and their cultures has shown over and over again that inclusive cultures

access a powerful tipping point of energy and commitment. People feel, "This is a place where I can belong and where I can contribute my best work".

Such places are characterised by their innovation, energy and a focus on performance. In addition to streams of great new ideas, they also manage to bridge the 'knowing-doing gap', the typical divide between strategy and implementation. Everyone's aligned. Everyone's engaged.

Essentially, it's about how to mobilise each person around organisational priorities so that things get done. In such places everyone assumes appropriate leadership responsibility. Managers remain formally accountable, but leadership is distributed throughout the organisation. Everyone, from the most senior to the most junior, is clear about what they need to do and is committed to stepping up to do it.

What underpins this sort of inclusive culture?

The first steps involve removing bias in the system and opening up the organisation to fresh ideas about talent management. This includes more diversity: men *and* women, as well as people from a range of backgrounds and social groups. Indeed, it is this diversity that can become the source of innovative problem-solving - an attribute highly prized in today's complex world.

Talented and ambitious people don't usually wait for their organisations to 'see the light' and build that inclusive culture! Our research has shown that individuals *can* exercise leadership and make a vital difference - for themselves and for others in their network - through what they do, even when things around them are by no means perfect.

How can you transform the place where you work?

Perhaps all you need is a roadmap to support you in this next stage of your career. Like Matt, maybe you're willing to learn new ways of operating, as well as ways you might refine some of your existing approaches.

Matt and his colleagues focussed their attention on the most important skills for doing well in a less than perfect organisation. For example, they learned how to use both power and influence to get things done, even when some matters were outside the scope of their direct control. They learned about innovation and collaboration, problem-solving and decision-making. These new skills helped them convince the top management team to let them pilot some different ways of doing things that have now been adopted in two more countries in our region.

Committed people can take the lead in making their workplace more inclusive and more innovative. You don't need to wait for things to be perfect!