
Workplace Ecology: Linking Productivity and People

by
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One has only to read the papers or listen to the news to notice the increasing pre-occupation with productivity, shortages of skilled workers and the issue of the brain drain from Canada. Why is Canada slipping behind in productivity measures? Why can't organizations hire and retain the best and brightest? Why is there so much turmoil in many of our companies?

The problem has been attributed to a variety of things:

- ~ the workers (lack of worker loyalty and commitment, low level of worker skills and /or incompetence);
- ~ management (poor management and/or lack of leadership, mistreatment of workers, poor pay levels), or
- ~ the government (high taxes; a poor education system).

While there may be some truth in each of these we are missing the main point by trying to isolate a single cause. We need to look at the whole system, not isolated parts. Once you consider the whole system, the problem is really very basic - we have dehumanized the workplace to the point that people at all levels have become alienated from the organization. Companies that have spent much of the last two decades trying to slash their way to profitability are now wondering why they have a demoralized and unproductive workforce.

There have been ample studies and reports to support the need for improved day to day management of people. Whether you look at results from researchers such as Jeffery Pfeffer (Stanford), or multi-year studies by The Gallup Organization and The Lebow Group, the conclusions are the same. It is the day to day relationships between people and their resulting attitudes and perceptions that determine how productive an organization will be. The Canadian

Labour Market and Productivity Centre bluntly states that "unless labour/management relations are constructive, it is very difficult to bring about increases in productivity" (Viewpoints '98). To paraphrase an earlier American election slogan, "It's the people, stupid", not as 'it's their fault', but because they are the heart and soul of the organization. In spite of the current fad for many companies and organizations to claim that they value people as their main asset, what they do drowns out what they say. Therein lies the problem. The bottom line is that 'business values' must be balanced with 'people values' if an organization is to be successful in the 21st century.

There is virtually no technology that you can invent, license or buy, or process that you can install, that your rivals can't eventually match. The only true competitive advantage you have is your workforce and how well it performs. Unfortunately many companies, including numerous in the high-tech sector, have not yet realized that you can not coerce, command, control or buy commitment and enthusiasm, neither can you force-feed creativity and innovation. You can, however, create an environment that promotes these attributes. This is the real work of today's leaders. To create an environment that calls out to the mind and spirit of the knowledgeable worker, so that they choose to follow and commit themselves to creating a worthwhile product or service.

It is time to step back and look closely at the 'workplace ecology', as I define the inter-relationships between and among people and the various systems in place at work. From my experience in the public, private and not for profit sectors, this has a very direct impact on productivity and success rates. Processes and technology don't create or innovate, people do. This is why we need to create an innovative workplace that promotes a 'workplace ecology'

that encourages the full participation and commitment of everybody.

Companies would do well to observe and learn not only from the likes of Doug Bergman (Great Plains Software), James Goodnight (SAS Institute) and Herb Kelleher (Southwest Airlines), but also from outstanding leaders in the not for profit sector. These people and their volunteers produce extraordinary results. They put their heart and soul into projects, not because of the money or because someone told them to, but because they believe in what they're doing and that it will help make the world a better place. It's this forging together of commitment and participation that today's companies need. It is what will separate them from the competition.

An extensive body of research, including a recent report done by KPMG and the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance, supports my own experience that money alone is not the deciding factor in attracting, keeping and creating highly productive teams. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves. They want their work to have meaning not only to themselves but to the world at large. A mission that seems larger than life can be both a powerful magnet and a strong motivator. I've seen this proven in the public and private sectors by the dedication and commitment of scientists working on medical, agricultural and food issues. They knew the importance of their work to and for people. They felt that they were working for a greater cause, not just to make money for the company or some shadowy group of investors.

The 'workplace ecology' of such highly productive groups exhibits a camaraderie and an "esprit de corps" that is both exhilarating and infectious. People look forward to and enjoy their work. For them, meeting and overcoming challenges is fun. People trust and support each other, and are able to brainstorm and critique ideas without fear of ridicule.

The resulting outcomes are always more innovative and better than if developed in isolation.

Sadly, I've also witnessed the impact of policies and actions introduced to "improve productivity and the bottom line" but which were dis-respectful of people, creating a dysfunctional 'workplace ecology'. People became de-moralized and de-motivated. They were reluctant to take risks for fear of losing their jobs. There was also a loss of trust between the workers and their managers and in the organization. People were afraid to be seen talking to others, so collaborative work ground to a halt. The workplace had become toxic to the creativity, innovativeness and sense of curiosity so necessary for a high performance, highly productive organization.

The leadership of and within companies and the day to day management style can do a great deal to affect the productivity of an organization. What that affect will be, however, is dependent on how people are treated. Unfortunately people tend to learn from what they've seen allowed in the past, and all too often past management techniques have been disrespectful of people and ill-suited to creating today's high performance successful organization. Unfortunately many managers don't recognize the underlying cause of the problems, since they have had their 'people skills' buried under many layers of financial and technical 'bottom line' jargon. We need to find ways to help managers and leaders understand and deal with the 'workplace ecology' and resultant stresses. They need support in understanding and developing a workplace where the business values are in balance with the people values, so that they can create productive workplaces. The phenomenal increase in executive, business and personal coaching in the U.S. may be one response to the underlying recognition of these needs.

If companies truly want to excel in the 21st century they need to develop leaders at every level of the organization. They need to balance work and people values to actively develop a highly creative, innovative workplace that promotes a 'workplace ecology' supportive of participation, collaboration and excellence.

The following steps are key to creating such a productive 'workplace ecology':

- 1) First and foremost, create an atmosphere that is respectful of people. This allows everybody to feel accepted and able to participate to their fullest. If you respect people, they will respect you and be more likely to cut you some slack when times get rough.
- 2) Spend time with your people and practice "naive" listening to learn more about their interests and needs. When people know that you're really interested in them as people, they feel more accepted and involved in what you are doing and trust grows. When people feel that they can trust you they are more willing to share their "first draft ideas" and off-the-wall thoughts. These are often the ideas which lead to really creative solutions.
- 3) Manage the work environment and processes while developing the skills to lead your people. Carefully chose a mentor, or consider hiring a Personal/Executive Development Coach, to help you. People will tackle jobs with far more enthusiasm when they know that they can count on you to do whatever it takes to kick down the barriers and support their efforts.
- 4) Understand the "big picture" and provide people with a compelling, worthwhile mission that they can be proud to be part of. Be sure that you take time to understand their needs, so that you can show how they will benefit from accomplishing the work.
- 5) Share information with your people about the company, how it's doing, budget items, strategies etc. People often know more than you think, and if you want to tap into the intelligence of everybody, they have to know what's going on before they can contribute.

- 6) Try to involve as many of the people that will be affected by a decision as possible when making the decision. The extra time taken to deal with the diversity of opinion will be far outweighed by the higher quality of the final decision. You'll likely be dealing with a highly diverse audience, so take advantage of the diversity within your organization to ensure that you don't miss the mark.
- 7) Provide people with variety, learning opportunities and challenges. People like and need these stimuli to keep them sharp and engaged. Since most jobs contain a great deal of tedious work, you have to make an effort to find activities that do challenge your people. You'll be glad you did though, as they usually exceed expectations.
- 8) Above all else, don't take yourself too seriously and have fun !!

If you can follow these simple steps, your workplace will be a centre of productivity and you will have gained a significant sustainable competitive advantage over others in your field.

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