

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Beyond Buy-in: Changing Workplace Culture Quickly

Take a look at your own approach

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Woody Allan once said "80% of success in life is just showing up." Unfortunately, you can get by in the workplace with less.

I often ask managers "In your workplace, what percentage of full effort is needed to avoid getting fired?" I suggest a scale. A 100% rating represents absolute devotion every working minute. At the other end of the scale, 0% represents spending the work day breathing, net-surfing for new YouTube videos and collecting a pay cheque. The answer I typically get is around 45% effort. This suggests that 55% per cent of the money that employers pay out in exchange for employee effort is wasted.

Employment is not an exact pay-for-effort transaction. Beyond the "I'll get fired if I don't" line, the effort employees give you is up to them. Their choices are driven by how they feel about the place they work – or more correctly, how the place they work makes them feel about themselves. How the workplace engages employees is a function of organizational culture.

Too often culture change gets bogged down in the slow process of getting "buy-in." Employees quickly become cynical, observing that management is talking about a new way, but complaining that "nothing is really changing." Waiting for buy-in ignores the psychological truth that behaviour dictates belief.

In 1979 the Edmonton Oilers joined the NHL transferred from the defunct WHA. At that time, they had a talented but independent bunch of rookies, few with significant professional experience. Their attitude and work ethic were not up to NHL standards.

Oilers' coach Glen Sather transformed them. But he didn't start by preaching about a new attitude. Instead, he changed what they did. Sather told his players, "You dress professionally, you look professional. You look professional, you feel professional. You feel professional, you play better." He forced his sloppy kids to buy nice suits and insisted on a strict dress code. Smartness and unity were a requirement both on and off the ice. If the Oilers went to a bar (which they often did), they all left together. On the ice, if they went into the corner, they all went together. That disciplined culture was at the core of Sather's transformation from loosely assembled talent to a great dynasty (Four Stanley Cups).

Sathers' approach illustrates a point that I believe is lost in most workplace change initiatives. Change what people do and the buy-in will follow. Sather didn't wait for Gretzky, Messier, Coffey, Fuhr and the others to adopt a professional attitude. He knew that if he could get them to act like a professional team, they'd start to think like one.

One of the most dramatic workplace examples of practice-based culture change I was ever involved with occurred in a manufacturing plant in Ontario. The plant culture was extremely adversarial with a powerful local union that virtually ran the place.

A new management team was given a short time to turn the plant around or close it down. Under an outstanding plant manager, we succeeded. There were no town hall meetings or Kumbaya sessions. Instead, the plant manager insisted that every senior manager spend one to two hours a day on the floor, chatting directly with employees. The problem was that the employees didn't speak back. For nearly six months, the one-sided attempt continued. The plant manager had to deal with a near-mutiny from the despairing management team.

Continued...

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Feature continued

Then one day, an employee suggested a change to the layout of the assembly line. Her suggestion was minor and the benefits uncertain, but we did it anyway. The employee was brought in as the advisor and her co-workers were consulted. Following the changes, we launched the first of many celebration events in which all departments were invited to celebrate the success.

Other activities followed, including a new approach to labour relations that stressed explaining the principles used to make decisions. Within six months the old union leaders were ousted by a new collaborative group, there was a fun new atmosphere and the plant was breaking production records.

Management's approach was based on culture-forming practices, practices that meet the following criteria:

- They involve visible changes to plant conditions or management action;
- They change how employees interact with each other, with management or with their workplace environment;
- They are persistent and frequent;
- They symbolize a new and different mindset;
- They break with past culture;
- They produce noticeable effect;
- They make people feel good about themselves.

I've seen many organizations that tried to inspire change by doing the buy-in thing. They were great at fancy slogans, but not once did anyone remark, "Gee, I am going to give up what was comfortable yesterday because that slogan on the wall really inspires me." To change what you believe in, we need to change what you have experienced. It is what is done that counts.

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