

What the hell, I'll give it a go

09 Jan 2007 | Neil Cassie

If you can't get your pressurised, exhausted, confused and cynical managers to the tipping point where their response to a new initiative is 'what the hell, I'll give it a go', it spells failure for your business and its ambitions.

A recent study by McKinsey of the most effective way to create sustainable change within large organisations was informed by such leadership gurus as Jack Welch, ex President of GE, and extensive research amongst the CEOs of large American corporations.

The study concluded that the 'tipping point' that indicated potential success or failure came when a previously disaffected manager said of their company's tipping, 'what the hell, I'll give it a go' – or words to that effect.

This conclusion may at first shock in its simplicity. It is not something that can be put on a graph or bar chart and it certainly isn't a new 'magic bullet' process or philosophy.

But, in essence, it is the future.

Failure to get your pressurised, exhausted, confused, cynical and - at worst - lost managers to that point of intent means failure for your business and its ambitions.

However, success in getting to that simple but profound point indicates that you have transformed how your company is led, behaves and performs.

Too often though, leaders abandon responsibility for the outcome immediately they have come up with the new vision. 'Job done' seems to be the prevailing attitude without any question of the behavioural implications at the leadership level.

Then they wonder, 'why they don't get it' as their people employ sophisticated and engrained tactics to resist change.

Pouring huge amounts of money into 'cascade' programmes, events and training (only to watch apparently enthusiastic employees dissolve into their old behaviour on return to their desks) serves to compound leadership's sense of frustration.

This investment and crazed activity may provide the temporary benefit of making your leadership appear to be taking responsibility for the outcome. But in reality it is a diversionary tactic that sustains the existing hierarchy and operating model.

It is at worst, an investment in failure that allows the leadership to displace blame onto their HR, Training & Corporate Comms Managers – and ultimately onto their people. And this is where the cynicism that is so hard to overcome is bred.

So, what is it that leaders must 'try' before they can be confident that their people will too?

Well, leaders must try to put their people first, not last.

Successful modern organisations are those that are managing the transition from 'push' to 'pull' economics.

They are thriving despite the shift from predictive to non-predictive demand. From an environment where top-



down structure, centralised control & tightly managed procedures prevailed to one where interdependence, flexibility and decentralised decision making have become the norm.

The former is recognisable by being resource-centric with a focus on efficiency - the latter by being people-centric with a focus on innovation.

In other words, they are 'People First' organisations where the value and growth of each individual is inextricably linked with the value and growth of the organisation.

And they define leadership responsibility not by the old functions or hierarchies. They manage by deploying a 'People First Matrix' *, which embraces the four key components of Environment, Ideas, Communities & Productivity.

The '10 Steps' that follow cover these four key components to effective leadership. If your attitude now is 'what the hell, I'll give them a go' then this could be the first step towards speaking the same language as your employees and closing the gap between your vision and their behaviour.

1. You must ensure that the culture of the organisation is the beacon that guides the behaviour of your people and impacts positively all your external relationships & contacts.
2. You must not rest until there is total understanding of, belief in and alignment with the vision of your business, its core purpose and the key strategies that will lead you there.
3. You must make the responsibility to fulfil the vision personal for everyone in your company and you must make accountability, remuneration & reward specific to each individual.
4. You must tear down the silos, fiefdoms and hierarchies that exist within your business and replace them with a flexible, interdependent, innovative organism.
5. You must create a free flowing, community based, market driven work environment where talent flows to where the customer need or value creation potential is greatest.
6. You must invest in a multiplicity of means to capture, develop, invest in, deploy and celebrate the ideas of your people.
7. You must replace existing control systems with 'intuitive' systems that supply your human capital with the tools, skills & resources it needs to deliver value with optimal efficiency and impact.
8. You must become fanatical about capturing the knowledge gained from every phase of customer interaction and place equal importance on learning from failure and success.
9. You must speak the language of your employee and in their medium of choice in order to be heard. Now, in order to engage, you must enter into a conversation – a tacit dialogue rather than a formal broadcast.
10. You must replace experts with storytellers, answers with questions, bullet points with intelligence, e-mails with laughter, meetings with imagination and Power Point with respect & trust.

In short, you must place inspiration at the heart & soul of your leadership.

As a leader, the greatest crime at this point would be to look at the list and change your mind.

Filing this under too difficult, or cherry picking those elements you feel most comfortable with is a step to failure, not success.

What lay behind the simplicity of the words identified by McKinsey was of course, their meaning.



It was the scale of the change and the overwhelming impact on all areas of working life that ensured that these few words were profound. Paralysis is the typical outcome of change of this scale followed by avoidance, which leads to regression.

It seems that - by starting with the attitude you wish your people to eventually embrace; by committing to the 10 Steps that lead to a 'People First' organisation; by making the consistent, transparent & accountable behaviour of the leadership team a priority; by ensuring that responsibility for the outcome is everyone's responsibility and by leading by example - you will close the gap between your vision and your people's behaviour.

Now would not be a moment too soon to start on that journey.

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