How a culture of contribution gives your company a grow-up call

Fisher, James R Jr

Some time ago I was invited to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) in Cambridge, Massachusetts to work with scientists and engineers. My invitation was to deal with a teaming problem. The ring laser gyro guidance system, designed in the Charles Stark Draper Laboratories of M.I.T. and built at Honeywell in Clearwater, Florida, was failing. With 1,000 miles between designer and builder, this wasn't too surprising. The designers had little appreciation of the problems their designs caused in production, which had worked well in the laboratory. It was a surprise to them that these designs could not be replicated with equal quality in production. Several meetings resolved the issue so that modifications were made to the design and the problem was resolved. Likewise, builders discovered they had failed to communicate production constraints. With an understanding of the problem, designers and builders could now team,. toward total quality management.

One glitch to this otherwise successful resolution, however, surfaced during the intervention: teaming difficulty of the M.I.T. scientists. It wasn't the separation of 1,000 miles that became a bridge too far-but the office or lab next door.

The Charles Stark Draper Laboratories are housed in two imposing, circular towers on the M.I.T. campus. These circular structures translate into offices and laboratories designed so that work is always "right around the bend" from a colleague. No one can look into a co-worker's office. This might have merit if creative work were done in a vacuum, or if the collaborative element were not vital. But it is. Ergonomically, these buildings magnified division, separation, isolation.

In interviewing scientists, many of whom worked next door to each other, I learned that interaction was more uncommon than common. Beyond that, some were unabashedly gossipmongers, others decidedly paranoid, sensing all kinds of plots to compromise their work. The atmosphere was writhe with a childish character to an otherwise adult climate. One physical chemist mentioned with considerable pride that he hadn't spoken to the biochemist next door in 20 years.

"Don't you have to work together?" I innocently asked. "Of course," he chortled, "but we have messengers to handle the paperwork."

The obstacles to a teaming culture are substantial in the best of circumstances. But here, structure alone discouraged teaming. As much confidence as these scientists and engineers might have in physics and chemistry, behavior certainly follows the structure and function of work. This was not a culture of contribution, but a fertile climate for behaviors that discourage teaming while eating away at the infrastructure.

Major obstacles to teaming-- an industrial society mind-set

As we approach the 21st century, attitudes toward individuality and self-sufficiency are coming under fire. These qualities contribute to competition and rivalry within and between functions and organizations. Narcissism on the one hand and the frontier spirit of culture on the other are causing problems. This culture instills the belief in one's individual capacity to rise to the level of one's abilities and, at the same time, is dedicated to the celebration of equality. Equality seems a good thing until it sponsors depersonalization by treating everyone as if the same. Equality of opportunity is one thing. Equality of talent is quite another. We cannot have it both ways.

The combined tension between these two belief systems creates an inherent contradiction: one leads to rivalry and disruptive behavior as individuals strive "to get ahead," while the other leads to an inconclusive middle ground where the pressure "to go along" makes it easy to avoid taking the initiative or hazarding risks. This leads to a culture of finger pointing, scapegoating, spreading misinformation, of retreating into the rumor mill. Appreciation of reality dies a slow but certain death as the spirit is driven out of productive work. People bring their bodies to work and leave their minds at home. Attention shifts to what is wrong with everything, everybody.

In any given company, according to management guru J.M. Juran in Juran on Planning Quality (Free Press, 1987) 15 percent of the cost of making a product is direct labor and 85 percent is indirect labor. Direct labor costs have been mastered as blue collar workers have become the best in the world. But unfortunately, these workers handle only the many trivial problems (which constitute 15 percent of outcome) versus the vital few that are handled by management and professionals (which constitute 85 percent of outcome). Stated otherwise, 20 percent of the work force is usually responsible for 80 percent of the actual success of any given operation, or 80 percent of a work force contributes about 20 percent of the work accomplished.

Not in your shop?

Consider this work climate. There is a well-defined pecking order. The boss is prominent and controls everything. Management enjoys privileges and perks; bonuses and benefits that are not available to the rank and file. Individual success is measured by making it into management. Certain demands and expectations are made of workers, and if they comply, they are recognized and rewarded accordingly. Personal and professional life are considered separate. Sound familiar?

From comfort to complacency

When the culture and structure of work is organized around management dependency, it fosters the culture of comfort, where external stimuli control behavior and where workers react to management's demands and expectations. This is the climate of unconscious incompetence because no one senses that there is a problem. This was the climate of panic in 1980 when NBC television aired "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?"

This program profiled the remarkable success Japan enjoyed with American technology developed by W Edwards Deming, J. M. Juran, and Peter Drucker. Japan was using Deming's statistical quality control, Juran's methodology for solving chronic quality problems, and Drucker's advocacy of management by objectives (MBOs). This translated into quality-control circles, which are now an American standard.

The aim was to create a culture of contribution, but it misfired. There was an admirable concentration on the quality of work, quality of work life, quality of management; a liberalization of perks and benefits, of extended leave for expectant mothers; a focus on quality of health, the creation of recreational complexes at work, greater attention to social events (TGIF beer blasts), an advocacy board to review fairness issues, and a promotion of group feelings. The culture of comfort materialized as the workplace became an adult playpen with workers taking two-hour lunch breaks to "work out" at the company's athletic facility, while social events were planned during business hours.

Some social engineers got the bright idea that good times and fun at work should be broadened to extended leave. Bethlehem Steel and Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), for example, devised plans whereby veteran workers would receive an additional 13 weeks paid vacation every five years. John Strohmeyer writes about this in Crisis in Bethlehem (Penguin, 1987). What did most workers do with this extra time? Improve their minds? Most got second jobs. Instead of gratitude, when the sabbatical expired, they got mad. They found it impossible to maintain their new lifestyle without working both jobs. The plan was dropped. It was a bad idea with good intentions that went wrong.

Workers went from being management dependent as the "child" to the manager-as-parent to become the spoiled-child counterdependent on the company that now became surrogate "mother." The culture of complacency was thus created and with it, conscious incompetence-a conscious but incompetent effort to address the problem of productivity.

The unintended consequence of this blind generosity was the creation of a work force insulated from the impact of real events. While the company might be struggling for survival, workers in this culture might be playing cover-your-ass (CYA) or show-your-ass (SYA) games, operating with confused priorities, treating personal disruptions as crisis situations, retreating into "we/they" polarity when challenged to perform, assuming the role of the victim, or avoiding real work at any cost by simply appearing busy.

A study of minority/majority professionals brought this to my attention. Honeywell Avionics in Clearwater, Florida, where 3,000 of the 4,000 employees who were professional workers-engineers, scientists, administrators, managers-were canvassed in a stratified random sample. A survey questionnaire, using psychologist Frederick Herzberg's famous Two-Factor Motivation Theory (See sidebar below.) was followed by individual interviews. Back in the 1950s, Herzberg had posited that workplace behavior is most affected by two factors-by either hygiene (the work environment) or by the challenge of the work itself-but that the best results by far came out of improving the challenge of the work, not by improving the quality of the work environment.

The Honeywell results were quite conclusive. "Hygiene factors," the non-motivators, were the key to these workers' performance. It wasn't a problem of color but of work culture that held the key to productivity.

Creating the culture of contribution

Unwittingly, many workers have been conditioned into learned helplessness and "non-responsibility." To repair this damage, to bring workers and managers into sync, is not a one-step process. For many companies it means a radical shift in emphasis from what the company can do for workers to what workers can do for the company.

Workers need to think like victors, not victims; to be purposeful, not personalities; to take risks, not be obsessed with security; to cooperate, not simply comply; to be creative, not mirror expected behavior; to be proactive, not reactive; to focus on what is right, not what is wrong. They need to act like adults. And yes, they need to be selfish, not selfless.

If these attributes take hold, workers appear motivated by challenging work, not afraid to fail because they have a chance to succeed. They are apt to express their opinions and challenge those who differ to think otherwise. The atmosphere is collegial without being pretentious. Workers are not always in agreement, but being right is not as important as being effective. The climate may seem chaotic, as if workers are goofing off, but nothing could be further from the truth. Workers are "completers," not complainers. The air is full of conflict, but it is managed conflict. Workers know their complementary roles and move with happy fluidity to confluence. Confrontation is as natural as breathing and as polite and frequent. No one is spared, neither worker nor manager, as peer pressure is the monitor to excellence. Workers anticipate chronic trends and dispatch them accordingly. Crisis management is an embarrassment.

The climate is positive with freedom "to do your own thing," which is a privilege rather than a right, so it is not abused. These workers are selfish in the sense that they clearly have a high need to please themselves. Yet they are much less self-centered than those of the please-other mentality. Self-interest creates enthusiasm, which is catching and directed toward the service of others. In this sense they display the antithesis of narcissism. They see management far differently than it sees itself Management is there to lead and serve, not to dictate and demand. They are management's first customer. There are no bosses, only partners; no ideal types to follow, only an honest appreciation of each other's assets and limitations to accomplish a task. Problems occur, but there is no panic. Defining a problem takes precedence over "doing something even if it is wrong." There is evidence of creative vitality everywhere, from the casual way of dress to the layout of work stations. Signs are replete but with humor, not hubris-"Six Sigma Quality Saves on Excedrin"-chiding fellow workers to prevent problems, not correct them. Workers are concerned with what is wrong, not who is wrong and motivated by problems, not perks; by work itself, not accrued benefits; by creative license, not conformity; by owning what they do, not acting like renters; by doing, not having. Workers in this teaming culture of contribution of a please-self and self-managing mentality find work as liberating as play, and twice as much fun. They have a high sense of

self-worth, appreciate what they have and are, take pride in their achievements, are involved and committed to projects, are spirited by a sense of growing in the job and as persons, and recognize the natural interdependent nature of work, life, and success. They are adults in conscious competence, leaving their parents and the mind-set of the child behind.

Turning resistance into power

Conscious competence embraces the natural resistance to pain, discomfort, failure, insecurity, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction. It soars to new heights because of this embrace. "The dove, as she speeds her way through the air, may marvel at the resistance to her flight by the atmosphere," suggests German philosopher Immanuel Kant, "but we know that but for that resistance she could not fly at all." Nor can workers fly without a similar embrace.

Often independence and dependence are postured at the expense of cooperation-and as the reason we cannot soar. Then one day, smitten with conscious competence, we realize nothing can be accomplished alone, that our skills, as impressive as they may be, need others to compensate for what we do poorly. "People of great strengths," observes Peter Drucker, "also have great weaknesses." Recognition of this interdependency leads to a collective will to succeed.

Yet culture often views resistance as something to avoid. When understood, that resistance has a purpose in assisting creativity; the habit of resisting resistance changes. Embracing resistance enhances our ability to learn and adapt to new situations. "We must not change the object of our judgment," notes organizational development consultant Darlene Goth-Neuman, "we must change the judgment of our object."

Many of us have the accelerator and the brake to the floor at once, burning up rubber and going nowhere-- forward inertia. Do we accept the absurdity of this? Not always. Instead we invent colloquialisms ("When the rubber hits the road") to mask our ambivalence. Is it not a sign of madness when the culture and structure of work that's invented burn us out?

This is what happens when well-meaning companies fail to invite workers to the problem solving. When trouble surfaces, and it always does, workers say, Not my problem. Let management handle it. They get the big bucks."

But management cannot handle it alone. Only worker-manager teams have the answers. The paradox is that all too often management says the right words"Let workers be empowered"-but doesn't share real power. Power doesn't corrupt, powerlessness does. Management says it is for restructuring pay but doesn't cut its bonus plans. Management talks partnership but doesn't give up executive perks or derail the pecking order. Management perpetuates the myth that it is the knowledge bank when it has few of the answers.

Reality has caught up to the rhetoric and is killing the spirit of workers who are given greater accountability with less power. Most organizations insist they have the culture of contribution, yet workers tell a different story. Why is the climate of contribution unknown territory for

most? Because it is a climate of chaos, conflict, confrontation, disagreement, challenge to authority, counterintuitive thinking, few or no bosses, little or no hierarchy, few or no discriminating perks, essentially a level playing field of contribution in which working together is no longer a buzzword but the norm.

Impossible? Absurd?

Russell Ackoff, the respected systems thinker and researcher from the Institute for Interactive Management, has observed that teaming is irrefutably consistent with Natural Law and First Principles of the physical sciences.

This counterintuitive revelation is a powerful justification for teaming. Compare this approach to downsizing, streamlining, reengineering, redundancy exercises, mergers, outsourcing, or reorganization. A company already has 90 percent of the people it needs to be successful. If my argument that 80 percent of a company's people contribute only 20 percent to the bottom line, the potential is there. People are not the problem, the system is. People are the answer.

The albatross of this post-industrial age is machine-- age thinking, where competition between people, disciplines, and departments remains the byword. Companies can talk until they are hoarse about empowerment, teamwork, and pride in work, but such talk is cheap if workers don't feel they count.

If you take a system apart to identify its components, and then operate those components in such a way that every component behaves as well as it possibly can, there is one thing of which you can be sure. The system as a whole will not behave as well as it can. The corollary to this is that if you have a system that is behaving as well as it can, none of its parts will be.

James R. Fisher, Jr, Ph.D., an industrial psychologist, is an international best-selling author of six books, his most recent Six Silent Killers: Management's Greatest Challenge (St. Lucie Press, 1998). Fisher is available for organizational development consulting and as a keynote speaker He may be reached by e-mail at DeltaGrpFL@aol. com.