

LET'S TALK ABOUT A REVOLUTION IN WORKPLACE RESPONSIBILITY

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In these uncertain times, there are two things you can absolutely bank on.

First, is the fact that your work will become increasingly important in the years ahead ... in fact will rise right to the top of the corporate agenda.

Second is the fact that it will only happen if you take charge of your *positioning* in the marketplace of business ideas ... if you become a *leader* and not just a functional manager ... if you become more *strategic* and more thus more influential in the towers of power.

In the past year I have worked at a strategic level with perhaps thirty large companies. Given the importance of people in every one of them, you might have expected to see workplace wellness and concern for the environment as key issues for discussion. In fact, as I recall, they came up for just a few minutes in exactly one of those meetings.

Everything else was more important. Competitiveness... cost-cutting ... employment equity ... relations with unions ... training ... marketing ... customer service ... government affairs ... and so on. Safety, health, and the environment – matters involving not just productivity or sales or profits, but the lives of the human beings on whom we rely for those things and the condition of the world in which we live – were pretty well ignored.

Now, you could easily blame negligent managers for this. You could easily point fingers at them and say that when they get their act together, you'll be able to do your job and make a difference. But you would be ignoring the way the world works if you took this route.

In real life, people pay attention to what hits them on the head.

We all use the cliché, "What gets measured gets managed." But most of us forget that *it's only what gets spoken about that will be either measured or managed*. So the first question to ask when you walk into any workplace is, "What do they talk about?" for that will give you an immediate indicator of what they think is important, what they attend to, what they focus on.

What the leaders talk about is what gets echoed by others. If the boss is a cost-control fanatic, you'll hear people discussing ways to cut costs or hold them down. If the boss is

crazy about customer service, customers will get lots of tender loving care. If he or she is passionate about profits, the people around them will talk about making money.

What happens, then, if the leader is not the most vocal, most outspoken, most consistent advocate of health and safety in the workplace? What if he or she says so little about the environment, that you have to conclude they just don't care? The answer is absolutely predictable. These matters will get too little attention. They simply won't be something that people have to think about or do anything about, because they know they will not be raised in conversation.

In small organizations, the chief executive is likely to have an intimate view of what's happening everywhere. A "hands on" management style is both possible and necessary. But as organizations get bigger, it gets harder for anyone to know everything, and it's easy to lose touch with what's happening just a short way from the boss's office. So if leadership is not a shared activity, if the CEO is the only one who can make decisions, or whose opinions carry weight, trouble is assured.

A critical key to success in this high-speed age is responsiveness. When things happen, you have to react...and *fast*. You cannot refer everything to head office. You can't wait for alerts to filter their way up through the hierarchy, for wise people to meet and confer and get as much information as they need to make a sensible decision, and for their wisdom to filter its way back down again to the front line. You have to *interpret* what's happening, *decide* what to do, and then *act* – all in the blink of an eye.

This is a dangerous situation. It's easy to make costly mistakes. And you may have to live for a very long time with the decisions you take today. So those charged with making decisions must be competent to make them.

The fact that organizations appoint specialists like you to monitor and promote their SHE activities is laudable. But if they expect you to *manage* these things and to make excellence in them a reality, they are dreaming. And if they do so while at the same time advocating the empowerment of every employee – which most executives now love to do – they are at odds with reality.

Empowerment begins with making people competent to make up their own minds, to use their own brains, and to do roughly the right thing a lot of the time. For this to happen, they need to know five simple things:

1. What to do – the task;
2. Why to do it – the goals and the expected impact;
3. How to do it – the method;
4. How well to do it – the standards;
5. And how well they're doing – the results.

This seems so simple as to be not worth mentioning. But the fact is, most people in most companies do not know these five things. Do a quick survey in your own workplace today, and you'll find this to be true.

Now, if that is the case, is people are in the dark about these very basic issues, how on earth can we say they're empowered? How on earth can we expect them to take responsibility for anything ... or to have any chance at all of doing what is right for the organization?

For all the talk of empowerment that flies about so many firms today, the ugly truth is that most people are systematically disempowered. They cannot perform because they are out of the information loop. They are in the dark. And whatever potential they might have, whatever performance management might expect from them, they will not deliver ... because they cannot.

Consider what this means for safety, health, and the environment. It must mean that there will continue to be accidents, there will be ongoing health problems, and the environment will continue to be spoiled by the organizations that already spend so much trying to improve in these areas.

In the quality arena today, the benchmark for many companies around the world is what is known as Four Sigma – which allows 6 210 defects per million opportunities to make a mistake. This is a very high standard and it has taken hard work to get there. But leaders in the quality field have a new goal. They talk now of Six Sigma – a measure, by the way, that most South African executives seem not even to have heard of. Six Sigma allows you to make just 3,4 mistakes per million opportunities. This is a 1 800 times improvement!

The thinking that makes Six Sigma the goal to shoot for is surely going to reach right into the SHE area and demand a radical rethink of what you do and how you do it. Already, the signs are there and the pressures for change and improvement are growing. Any organization that ignores the rising power of activists, lobbyists, and employees is asking for trouble. Any executive who thinks that this a distant prospect, that there is plenty of time to get their house in order, is in for a shock.

Organizations today must not only make profits under brutal circumstances, they must also behave themselves according to society's rules. And being a good citizen means not just that you will fix what you hurt, break, or befoul, but that you do not commit these social crimes in the first place.

How, then, to do it?

The answer lies in the actions of leaders. They alone can make the difference. Now, they must take personal responsibility for matters they have so far happily left to others.

Leadership is a topic that gets plenty of airtime and a lot of space in print. We are told glibly that South Africa, in particular, has too many managers and not enough leaders –

that it is “over-managed and under-led.” And there are any number of courses, seminars, and other programmes designed to create leaders and foster leadership.

In fact, many of these efforts will not achieve their intended results. Three, five, ten years from now, we will still lament the fact that South Africa is “over-managed and under-led.” Already, this country suffers from a skills crisis; not a problem ... a full-fledged *crisis*. Our organizations are being systematically hollowed out. There is a dearth of talent, and too much talent is leaving in search of better prospects elsewhere in the world.

Many people will take issue with this view. Those who leave are “racists” or “unpatriotic,” they tell us. “Let them go ... and good riddance.”

But it is not only the racists who are leaving. It is not only those who have no love for South Africa. The wave of emigrants includes countless thousands who love this country dearly, who would rather stay than go, whose roots will never be anywhere else ... and who, by the way, are not white.

We cannot afford this loss. But nor can we stop the music and wait for the moment when conditions here suit those who now leave. We have to get on with our business of creating wealth and jobs and welfare ... a better life for all.

Fortunately, there is a tool that we can use to change things fast. A tool so simple it’s ridiculous that we overlook it. A tool that costs nothing ... and that can be used by everyone.

It’s called conversation.

Think about this:

Organizations are managed conversations. All day long, the people in them talk to each other, to customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Yet most of these conversations are unmanaged, unfocused, haphazard affairs – they happen by *default* rather than *deliberately*.

But here’s a prediction: in this first decade of the New Century, “strategic conversation” will become the No.1 management tool. All the signs are there. The case is compelling.

First, consider the fact that at any point in time, the average major organization is using 12 of the 25 currently favourite management tools. In other words, intervention-itis is alive and well.

Second, consider the fact that three-quarters of all change efforts worldwide do not deliver the results expected of them.

Now consider what happens when the boss of one of these organizations walks in and announces the next new thing. He makes great speeches, shows stirring videos, puts

graffiti on the walls. And people “Ooh” and “Aah” and say, “Wonderful. This is just what we need.”

But then they put their heads down and wait for him or her – and “it” – to go away. And it will ... in no time at all. So the one thing that survives is what is known as the “BOHICA effect” – “bend over, here it comes again!”

Failed interventions cause terrible damage – and terrible trouble for leaders. They foster cynicism and distrust. They spoil the chances of efforts that have real merit and that are important. And they confirm what *cannot* be done rather than what *can* be done.

If safety, health, and the environment are to be truly big issues in the minds of our organizations, they must be central to our conversations. They must be spoken about to the point of boredom. Our leaders must be evangelists for them. They must repeat themselves and repeat themselves and repeat themselves ... until it becomes clear that they are absolutely serious.

But they must do more than talk. They must walk their talk. They must be seen to *do* the right things. They must personally be fanatical about safety, health, and the environment. They must lead by example.

The efforts of SHE managers and other specialists will obviously bring some results. Your role is a critical one, and what you do is of huge importance. But you cannot make the difference in a vacuum.

Leaders shape the organizational context – the space in which people work. That context is a product of their “strategic conversations.” If South Africa is to realize its ambitions to be world class, if our organizations are to be global competitors, and if our people are to reach their potential, we need a revolution that embraces and involves – and most of all, *inspires* – every last one of us.

We can create a better world. We can make a difference ... for the people who work inside our organizations and for those outside our walls. It begins not with some grand plan, not with some awesome, unaffordable infrastructure, not with a process that is so complex we will never make it work. Rather, it begins with you and me, with what we talk about from now on, and with the way we talk and listen to each other.

Safety, health, and the environment are not nice-to-haves. They are must-haves. So best we start talking about them right now.

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