

FEATURE ARTICLE: MESSAGE BOARD September 2009

Being Stretched: are we up for what it takes? Pt. 2

Asking for feedback on performance reflects our personal commitment to self-improvement, and the confidence to take what's offered and use it to learn, adapt and develop our skills, knowledge and experience. The commitment to personal and professional growth therefore, is as much about being open and willing (to be assessed by others, a sometimes discomfoting experience) as it is about stepping outside of our comfort zone in order to build a better team or company.

Though the past (our school experience, family upbringing et al) may have brought us to fear being stretched, part 1 of this article discussed the very real opportunities we have to consign our 'baggage' (our present fears) to the past, and open up to a new future. In essence it suggested that given the willingness to suspend our attitudes and beliefs, we could move from obduracy ("you can't teach an old dog new tricks") to possibility ("It can't hurt to give it a go").

A Performance-enhancing and Learning Culture in Companies

Do companies have a responsibility to create a culture where growth (professional and personal) is central to their business?

In many companies and organisations, Management silently wish their employees would take the initiative in performance and personal growth. I frequently hear the same refrain: "They are adults aren't they?" or incredibly "It's not my job" - in both cases, absolving themselves of personal responsibility to mentor the individuals in their sphere of influence. Most often, the problem is handballed to the Performance Review - a negative, non-negotiable process which is naturally loathed and feared by both sides of the equation.

Though companies with clearly expressed expectations and the structures to support them (the most notable being Google) exist, in most Australian workplaces people turn up for work, do a fair day's work and go home. Others (like Google) deliberately encourage the expansion of self-knowledge and reflection, so that people are energetically involved and actively participating in the vision and purpose of the company.

There are undoubted challenges to achieving and sustaining the kind of culture that is based on the willingness to change (ideas, methods, structures, systems). It is so much easier to retain the status quo - 'this is how we do business around here!' Muhammad Ali sums up the challenges well, saying "The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life." To that I would add that without the will to be stretched, learning does not take place and performance (personal and corporate) will always be a struggle.

Building Cultural Foundations: human development

Businesses are just human relationships: people working together in a common enterprise. Despite all the 'corp-speak': 'Who is your direct report?'; 'I need to manage this person in or out.'; 'Frank was moved side-ways.'; et al - the cultural foundation of the enterprise is only enhanced when:

- Precedence is given to listening to others' points of view, to enable common understanding and determine clear action.
- People have the opportunity to speak authentically (without fear or favour), to find new possibilities in working together.
- Performance is a two-way conversation, consistent with core purpose but allowing for a stretch beyond 'how we do things around here'.
- The time and resources to fulfil tasks or goals are provided.
- Problem-solving is underpinned by a common spirit: we are all working together to find effective and efficient responses to everyday situations.

Next month I will explore what it takes to develop a business culture that lives its vision consistently and aligns all stakeholders with its aspirations.

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WE ARE WHAT WE DO

Oh God! Performance reviews need to be done!

How often have you heard similar statements about Performance Reviews? The mutual distaste, if not dread, is almost palpable. It would seem to me that the performance review (and all that goes with it) is overdue for a change, another more relational approach...

As a manager, when was the last time you took the opportunity to ask an employee "How can I do better as a manager (all jokes aside, I really want to know)."

Being stretched means:

- You are up for the response(s) and prepared to listen openly.
- You are prepared to ask questions and clarify the things you've heard (even if you think you know already).

Being stretched means you will ask yourself these questions:

1. How was I feeling before I started the conversation (attitude)?
2. Have I learnt something about managing people?
3. Have I learnt something about my performance as a manager?
4. What was I feeling after the conversation?

Even if you are not managing people, the conversation could go this way "How can I do better as a colleague/workmate/supervisor?" Try the relational approach. It may seem awkward at first, but the rewards (unlike Performance Review scenarios) are great...

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Until next time... David

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Comments and/or questions? Mail me at: david@principlesinbusiness.com