

End complacency

Get employees excited about the company's mission

Question:

Earlier this year, I took over the position of president and chief executive officer when the person who held that title retired after serving in that capacity for the last 12 years. I have been with the company for 10 years, so the employees know me.

As I look ahead to 2005 and beyond, I see the potential for us to be an even stronger player in the marketplace. But for this to happen, we will have to make some changes and keep moving ahead.

One of the things I've observed that concerns me is that some of our people seem to have become a little complacent over the years. We've been very successful, and some of our folks seem to have the attitude that all they have to do is show up for work each day and that will be enough. Maybe they don't have the benefit of my perspective or the same sense of urgency I do. I look around and I see the competition taking aim at our customer base. I see the need to become even more effective in the way we do our work. I'd like to see us provide even stronger customer service.

What can I do to send a clear message that a new era is here? What can I do to get all of us truly pulling in the same direction, one that is future-oriented, where we build on our history of success rather than coasting on it?

Answer:

It was Heraclitus who long ago wrote, "There is nothing permanent except change." That statement was true when it was written, and it is obviously very true today. Like it or not, we live in an era of

rapid change. In an Information Age, change touches every aspect of our lives.

How well your organization does over the next decade is likely to be greatly influenced by the extent to which it embraces the challenges of the 21st century:

- Responding to change.
- Harnessing change.
- Creating change.

That you have recently assumed the role of president and CEO is a primary example of change. Furthermore, your question suggests that you see further change on the horizon. As you describe the situation at your company, I see you operating as a change champion. By this, I mean that you appear to be using your role to serve as a catalyst for positive change.

In light of your position, this is quite appropriate. You are the principal shaper of the corporate culture. In your role as top executive, you set the pace. On behalf of the organization, you chart its unfinished business. Your words and actions are primary points of reference when organizational members ask questions such as, "Where are we going?" "How will we get there?" "How will we know we've arrived?"

What can you do to set a clear signal that a new era is here? In my estimation, you need to provide a compelling vision that people can support and rally behind. I strongly encourage you to spend time reflecting upon your organization's "one thing," that product, good, service, method, approach, model, etc., about which your organization is passionate and where it has demonstrated expertise and capability and that is significantly related to the organization's bottom line.

Once you have identified your organization's one thing, it needs to be the focal point of all of your efforts. This is the essence of creating a high-performance organization.

At ODC, in our work with organizational clients, we spend a great deal of time building performance frameworks. Our operational definition of a high-performance organization is this: An organization with a focus on people, processes and adaptation. This is reflected in the organization's commitment to: customer-driven excellence; innovation; trust; integrity; and growth and profitability.

As you embark upon the task of linking and aligning individual and collective efforts in support of the high performance concept, use these critical questions as framing devices:

1. Why does this organization exist?

- Define the big picture.
- Provide a compelling purpose and vision.
- Pay attention to the business environment and the industry to encourage external adaptation.

2. What kind of culture do we want?

- Values. Identify, articulate, and practice them.
- Emphasize life-work balance.
- Focus on quality of work life.

3. How do we do our work?

- Mobilize employees around change.
- Develop process disciplines to encourage internal integration.
- Measure what really matters and communicate both successes and failures.

4. With what kinds of people do we wish to work?

- Focus on talent assessment.
- Unleash learning.
- Explore performance-based pay.

In answering these questions and by attending to the issues that flow from them, you will be creating a powerful culture of performance. You will be creating a culture that will be stimulating to your employees who, over time, will feel increasingly like owners rather than renters.

With regard to this last observation, in monitoring the effectiveness of your program, it is the behavior of your employees to which you will want to pay special attention. The extent to which they identify with the organization's high performance ideology will be crucial.

When employees commit to the program, when they buy in, you will know you are on the right path. If you want your employees to pull in the same direction and to adopt a shared view of the future, then focus on your organization's one thing and help others to do the same.



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