

PERFORMANCE EDGE



Top organizations are "hard-edged" about where they are going but "soft-hearted" about how they manage the journey. How to manage three key "soft-hearted" factors.

Every year Fortune publishes its list of "Most Admired" companies, and every year the same handful seem to be listed in the top 10. General Electric has won the number one position for the last three years; Johnson & Johnson has been on the list five of the past 10 years, and Southwest Airlines has made it three of the past five.

Certainly, economic performance plays an important role in achieving this distinction. But the criteria also include a number of intangibles, such as innovation, leadership capacity, talent, and quality. This raises a "chicken or egg" question: do these companies make the list because they perform well economically and can "afford" to pay attention to the soft variables? Or does their emphasis on the hidden qualities of success lead to superior financial accomplishment?

One thing they each have in common is that, while the company's goals are clearly stated, the means to accomplish these goals are left unspecified. You could say they are "hard-edged" about where they are going and "soft-hearted" about how they'll manage the journey.

"Hard-edge" goals

Aristotle concluded that more than anything else, men and women seek happiness – a sense of exhilaration or deep enjoyment from life. In the course of more than 8,000 studies, the research psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi concluded that one of the most important factors in achieving happiness is being completely involved in a "flow experience." And clear goals are characteristic of a "flow experience."

Because organizations exist to accomplish work that is too complex for individuals to accomplish on their own, fuzzy goals frustrate collective accomplishment. Left to their own devices, people will direct their thinking towards whatever aim looks interesting. This guarantees that individual efforts will be at cross-purposes and undermine the success of the group.

But when the context is clear, people focus their minds on the same goal; and individual efforts become synergistic and complementary.

"Soft-hearted" means

Not specifying the means to accomplish goals gives the operating entities the freedom to use their common sense and do things in the most direct way. They are also free to

use whatever feedback mechanisms are at hand to deepen their understanding of which actions lead to progress and which do not.

Just as a flock of migrating birds flies unerringly towards its breeding grounds with each bird maintaining its proper position relative to those around it, so top organizations make progress by pointing toward a destination and then allowing local units to devise their own means to get there. Using goals and measures gives everyone in the organization a common context for guiding their actions and discussing their progress.

But these leading companies do not stop there. Let us also explore how the less tangible, "soft hearted" factors manifest themselves. Three characteristics stand out:

- People feel free to do their best with a relaxed spirit and without fear, worry or stress
- Leaders emerge wherever they are needed regardless of whether they hold formal positions of leadership
- Innovations and fresh solutions are taken for granted since people are unafraid to journey into uncharted waters.

When you bring these three characteristics together within a company, you will discover people enjoying the kind of work that encourages them to explore the unknown. And you will find them confident that, whatever the challenge, the necessary leaders will emerge to guide them towards success.

Wouldn't it feel great to work for a company with this attitude? You may be thinking it could never happen. Well, why not - and why can't you be the one to start it?

Doing Your Best

Being free to do one's best depends entirely on a feeling that is rooted in trust, respect, and integrity and an expectation that "doing your best" is more important than "being the best."

When trust - the sense that people have each other's best interest at heart, integrity - the understanding that people say what they mean and mean what they say, and respect - treating others the way you wish to be treated, are evident, the climate is one of appreciation, enjoyment, and grace.

The difference between "doing your best" and "being the best" is the acknowledgement that there is spiritual wisdom within the consciousness of everyone, and that one person's universal truth is no better than another's. In other words, we are all in this thing called "life" together; each of us is trying to live the best we can. Have you ever observed how infants will doggedly keep repeating the same simple task until they master it, and how their faces will light up with joy when they succeed?

Clearly, for them the accomplishment is its own reward. Do you think they care, at that moment, if they are the best? Their accomplishment is free from fear, worry, self-importance, competition with peers, tension, rumors, backbiting, and office politics. Replacing these negative feelings are feelings of interest, curiosity, appreciation, attentiveness, laughter, kindness, and collaboration.

Leading from Within

Everyone has some talent for leadership, for who among us is not "leading" his or her own life. Imagine if your organization really appreciated this potential - would there not be all sorts of people stepping forward to make things better?

Releasing this energy in large organizations comes from understanding that:

- Every individual contributor can lead by "seeing the obvious and doing it"
- Leaders of other people who start with the natural feeling of "wanting to serve the needs of others first" bring out the best in those they lead
- Leaders of other leaders who act with the awareness that common sense, vision, and wisdom (in other words, leadership) lie solely within each person's own consciousness are able help others discover the capacity for leadership that lies within themselves

What these three forms of leadership have in common is the understanding that your state of mind matters. In other words, when you are experiencing optimal feelings – of being in the zone or at the top of your game - then leading from common sense and wisdom seems perfectly natural. Considering that you may not be aware when you are in the zone, you should try to notice when you are not there - not at the top of your game. Clues like anger, anxiety, insecurity, out-of-control thoughts warn you to wait - to postpone action until you have regained perspective.

Leaders who understand how their state of mind affects their capacity to lead also know that when they regard their co-workers as basically good (not flawed), those employees are more inspired, accountable, and forward-moving. They accept the reality of their circumstances and are less intimidated by adversity. In fact, feelings of inspiration, goodness, and grace often embody the spirit behind the value, vision, and mission statements that leaders write when they are in a quiet frame of mind. This is why these statements are often best developed in retreat settings and why, deep down, any group of people want to stay in touch with deeply human feelings at work.

Exploring the Unknown

Innovation happens when people are not afraid to explore a question - to look towards "what they don't know, rather than what they do know." This goes against our schooling, where we were taught that it's important to know the answer. Jumping to conclusions or rushing to opinions diminishes our willingness to wait for the emergent answer and prevents real breakthroughs.

Organizations that sustain change and grow innovatively have a strong sense of humility - the state of being comfortable with "not knowing." They also have faith and hope, for these are cut from the same cloth. Faith gives them the confidence to proceed in the face of uncertainty, and hope helps them see that possibilities exist beyond their own experience.

Invention happens when these three work together - the humility to take an open stance to life, the curiosity to explore its potential and the confidence to appreciate that things usually work out for the best and that the right solutions will appear when needed.

What this essay is saying is that within each of us there's a "hidden genius" where common sense abounds and where feelings of service, awe, and wonder can help us take our game to the next level. Encouraging these qualities gives an organization its performance edge and brings a sense of joy and fun to the workplace.

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