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Creating a high-performing culture during tough times

How do you keep employees engaged and productivity when everything around them is diverting their attention these days? It is difficult enough in good times, but when times are tough and you really need employees aligned and focused, distractions can be devastating to your organization.

High performance and success are not dependent on one simple factor or as a result of one or two things. The entire context you operate in greatly impacts your results. Think back to a time when you did not have the tools to do your job, or when you did not feel supported in getting done what you thought had to be done or even when you had a boss who was more of a hindrance than a help. You probably did not perform as well as you could have. Now contrast that memory with one of feeling particularly successful. How many things or people can you list that influenced the difference in your performance?

High performance and success are not dependent on one simple factor or as a result of one or two things. The entire context you operate in greatly impacts your results. This context includes the culture of the company – how things get done, how decisions get made, what works and does not work as far as behaviors and what gets rewarded and how – the complete environment in which employees interact with each other and with other stakeholders.

Every company has a culture. The key to building a high-performing culture is to make sure you consider “what” and “how” you will get to your destination points (the clear definitions of where you are going in a specific timeframe).

- What do the “norms” in the organization need to be to enable everyone to work effectively on the right initiatives?
- How can you clarify and reward the behaviors you desire and enact appropriate consequences for undesirable behavior?
- What elements of the culture need to change?
- How much change is required, and how do you successfully implement the change?

The majority of employees want to be a part of a compelling future, want to know what is most important at work and what excellence looks like. When you create a culture of performance and success, you inspire loyalty with employees and other stakeholders, and you create advocates who promote the company positively to others.

The specifics of a high-performance culture are unique to your company because they are based on what will work best for you to get you to where you want to go within the parameters you have defined. Every decision you make – almost every behavior you engage in – has advantages

and disadvantages, so there is no one perfect way. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to culture.

However, there is ample research to help us understand some commonalities for what makes a high-performing culture. The following are common attributes across 200 high-performing companies.

Clearly define what winning looks like.

Look across the entire organization and define what it looks like from a variety of perspectives – Production, Sales, Finance, R&D, etc.

Tap into your employees as a resource. Listen more and keep employees vested in success by communicating. Ask them if they have all the tools they need to be successful in their jobs. Ask what would help them be even more productive?

Measure what matters and what employees can relate to. Focus on additional metrics besides the financial ones.

- How are customer leads handled in order to achieve a desired profit margin?
- Are customer orders, returns, inquiries handled?
- How are products determined & developed?
- How does work get done (collaboration or individual efforts)?
- What are the customer and employee retention targets?

Be sure to communicate these other metrics on a monthly basis. Employees who are not in the financial world will be able to relate better to the results and will feel more included in the process. Visibly reward the desired behaviors and results.

Develop an ownership mentality and enable-educated risk-taking.

- Educate your employees by communicating acceptable behaviors and boundaries.
- When individuals understand the boundaries in which they can operate, as well as where the company wants to go, they feel empowered with a freedom to decide and act, and most often make the right choices. They begin to think and act like an "owner".

Keep an eye on the external environment.

High-performing organizations complement their drive to create a culture aligned to their destination points with an ongoing vigilance of looking at the external environment.

- Build deep relationships. Talk to your current suppliers and customers about their business and their perceptions of what's going on in the marketplace.
- Keep tabs on your competitors and what is going on in your particular industry.
- Take a look at other industries especially those doing well in tough times. What can you learn or adapt from their approach?

Monitoring the ever-changing environment gives you the edge in responding to new technologies and new competitors as well as downturns or upturns in the marketplace.

Commit to setting up employees for success and nurture their trust.

- Think back to a time when you did not have the tools to do your job, or when you did not feel supported in getting done what you thought had to be done or even when you had a boss who was more of a hindrance than a help. You probably did not perform as well as you could have. Now contrast that memory with one of feeling particularly successful. How many things or people can you list that influenced the difference in your performance? There are a lot of factors involved so make sure to think through what excellence will take and set your employees and yourself up for success.
- Tools might include training, coaching and feedback as well as engaging employees in sharing ideas and candidly discussing issues.

High-performance organizations do not take their culture for granted. They plan it, monitor it and manage it so that it remains aligned with they want to achieve. Through the process of clearly defining your destination points, as well as creating your breakthrough model and operations plans, you will have explored both the “what” and the “how”.

Completing and effectively communicating your strategic framework helps drive important components of the culture. When the destination is clear, people develop a sense of direction and focus, and this in turn contributes to a thriving culture and a successful journey.

A virtual cycle evolves when the strategic framework is cloudless, the culture is intentionally defined, and individuals are held accountable to achieving the behaviors and results outlined in both. Higher results are possible and, in fact, a more probable outcome.

About the author:

Holly Green is author of "More Than a Minute," and the CEO and managing director of The Human Factor LLC. She has more than 20 years of executive level and operations experience in Fortune 100, entrepreneurial, and management consulting organizations. She was previously president of The Ken Blanchard Companies, a global consulting and training organization as well as LumMed Inc. a biotech start-up. For more information, visit www.morethanaminute.com.