

Caring for People & Caring for Results – How to walk the tightrope?

In 1990 Sapien Corporation was formed on a single promise: To do whatever it takes to deliver right business results on time and on budget. In an industry where on time, on budget record is a measly 29 per cent, Sapien's track record at 83 per cent stands out. Sapien would not have been so significant a case study if it were just obsessed with delivering results on time and on budget. What is significant about Sapien is that it routinely makes it to Best Employers list in various geographies. Apart from being in the Top 25 Great Places to Work® in India, Sapien features amongst the 10 best consulting firms to work for in North America, the Best Workplaces in Canada, 100 Best workplaces in Europe, and Best Employers list in UK & in Germany.

I have interacted with a number of CEOs and done workshops for hundreds of senior executives on the theme of employee engagement and how to be a high performing Organisation with high employee engagement. In the words of one CEO, "We have brought in significant result orientation in the entire Organisation. I have closed down unprofitable businesses and let go of people. It is clear to most people that the new Organisation culture is about delivering results. However, in the last three years we are seeing significant industry growth, and high employee attrition. On one hand I have the largest order book in recent history; on the other hand I have a severe shortage of key talent. In my drive to bring in result orientation I have been hands on in my approach. As a result my second line has not developed adequate leadership capability. Today I do not have the confidence to delegate to my second line and focus on strategic aspects like acquiring capacities."

Organisations which have in the past become extremely results driven, sometimes at the cost of caring for people are discovering that when the economy is good their people have become extremely career driven, often at the cost of caring for the Organisation.

Most Organisations are, therefore keen on understanding how to get employees to care for the Organisation. And since it is a two Way Street, Organisations would like to be perceived as caring employers too. While performance orientation is here to stay, and Organisations do not harp on old slogans like "We are one family", most are in search of a psychological contract with employees which will promote higher engagement and thereby retention.

What makes some Organisations so good in delivering consistent results **and** being great places to work? A Great Place to Work® by definition is a place where employees trust the people they work for, take pride in what they do, and enjoy the company of people they work with. Many of us know of or have worked in Organisations which are financially successful, but cannot be called great places to work by the above definition. On the contrary, some of us have worked in Organisations with seemingly high levels of employee engagement but delivering poor business results.

Think about a time you were a part of a team which was very high on employee engagement and which was able to achieve significant business results. What did you observe in the way this team was led?

One common feature we observe in leaders of high performing teams with high employee engagement is their ability to build trust and convert potential of their team members to performance. Think of the time when someone was able to inspire the best in you. You will find some of the following to be true. These leaders have high expectations from their team members. They are able to project their faith in their potential, even when that faith is not backed by past performance of the team member. In almost all cases the team members trust these leaders, not just because of their role or expertise, but the personal qualities they have. These leaders are often able to challenge and confront team members effectively. It is not necessarily what the leaders do; even small things they do or say make a big difference because people trust them. John Whitmore in his book *Coaching for Performance* summarises the role of such a leader as building new awareness in the team member and enabling the team member to take responsibility for change.

Our observations suggest that leaders of such teams demonstrate certain sets of attributes which I have broadly clubbed under two headings:

1. Personal attributes:

These are akin to personal qualities required to build trust in a relationship. These include the following:

a. Integrity

While this is an oft-repeated term in Organisational context, it is visible as credibility of the immediate manager which is built by her ability to deliver on promises made. Well-meaning leaders sometimes do not view some of their statements as promises. For example, in one Organisation an incentive scheme was quickly redesigned when it was found that many employees were getting far more than what was anticipated. While management viewed it as a logical step, employees thought of this as an example of breaking a promise.

Effective leaders are able to reinforce that the relationship between them and their team member is that of mutual dependence between two fallible humans. They seek feedback, and are not afraid to say, “Sorry, I goofed up,” while trying at the same time to make sure that their actions match their words.

Integrity is also enhanced by honesty. High performing teams are more likely to be led by a Leader who is honest & ethical in her business dealings. High performing Organisations like Texas Instruments, Fedex, Mindtree, and Wipro are able to build leaders of this kind by a variety of methods. One of the most powerful is setting the right example – both recognizing the values leaders and exhibiting very low tolerance to lack of integrity.

b. Fairness

These leaders treat team members fairly regardless of background, caste, gender etc. Their people may not always like them, but do not question their motives. These leaders are not likely to indulge in favoritism. Organisations like Marriott hotels encourage fairness by making all managers sign their fairness policy and making sure that employees know about the escalation process. The supreme court of Fedex is known to be more fair than the judicial system of many countries! When employees come to such a leader they know that they will be given a fair deal.

c. Competence

There is no shying away from the fact that team members are more engaged when they perceive their leader as having professional competence. The CEO of Mindtree and many other Organisations post their goals in the Company intranet for all to see. More than 90 per cent of employees in Organisations which made it to the Great Place to Work® list in 2005 say that their managers have a vision for the team and know how to get there? Leaders of high performing teams are able to build a shared vision for their teams, and equally importantly, are able to use the strengths of their team members.

d. Caring

Caring is demonstrated when the Leader shows sincere interest in team member as a person and not just an employee. It is not uncommon, for example, to find the CEO of Classic Stripes in Mumbai attending a marriage of an employee's daughter in Ratnagiri, in Maharashtra's hinterland.

Caring is demonstrated through showing empathy, warmth, respect and genuineness. Leaders in high performing teams with equally high employee engagement are able to appreciate the uniqueness in their team members, even amongst the ones who are not rated as high performers. They are able to project parts of themselves in seemingly opposite situations and yet come across as authentic. A controversial example of this quality is the former American president Bill Clinton.

The outcome of the above personal attributes is in building trust in relationship. However, while trust is required for high employee engagement, it is only the starting point. Leaders in high performance teams are able to build on trust and convert the potential of their team members into performance by using a number of attributes, which I am broadly categorizing as managerial attributes.

2. Managerial Attributes

These are akin to managerial qualities required to convert potential in team members into performance. These include the following:

a. Growth and Development

These leaders show keen interest in the growth and development of their team members by creating adequate learning opportunities and encouraging employee development. CSC, for example, supports their Leaders by a policy of not only reimbursing fees for higher education, but also protecting seniority of employees who go for higher education. Their performance appraisal has 20 per cent weight age on self-development goals. These Organisations do not use reasons like lack of vacancy as legitimate excuses for not offering the required learning opportunities for their employees. They create these opportunities.

These leaders are able to give objective feedback to enable employees to focus on their talent and be more productive.

b. Involvement

While offering career opportunities may not be feasible for all managers, leaders who lead high performance teams are able to involve their employees in decisions that impact them. They not only seek, but implement suggestions. Their team members may not agree to all their decisions, but they know that they had the opportunity to influence the decisions.

c. Recognition

We have seen these Leaders follow the 4:1 rule in giving feedback. They are able to give recognition and praise to their team members for both doing good work & extra effort. Recognition for them is a part of their style rather than a one off event. They recognize people who are not connected to their team, for example, a waiter in a restaurant. They are able to spot people doing the right things. Their team members cherish the handwritten notes from them.

d. Pride

Nike recognises the importance of generating pride in a team by designating some of their senior executives as official storytellers. These leaders are able project the challenge of the job, accomplishments of the team and the Organisation in a manner which enables the employee to take pride.

Almost all high performing teams have a high degree of pride. Texas Instruments has gallery of *Living Legends*, Nobel Prize winners produced by TI. Employees in Adobe

systems take immense pride in the work they do. Over 90 per cent of employees of these Organisations say that they are proud to be a part of the Organisation. Employees in Mindtree take a lot of pride in the community work being done by the Organisation.

e. Camaraderie

Leaders in these teams encourage celebrating special events. When you enter Mindtree Office you will find a bell which is rung every time there is a business win or good news to share. Almost everything is a special event, particularly induction/ welcome of new members. Team members spontaneously create avenues for fun & enjoyment. At Eli Lilly employees do not wait for big achievements to celebrate. Any small reason to celebrate will result in a high tea and snacks and a short gathering of the employees. Occasions like Birthdays are opportunities for more than the usual cake cutting and balloon bursting routine. Employees play team games and enjoy to the fullest. But of course no employee can get away that easily without a treat. In some work places, employees are encouraged to take the day off and spend time with their family in which case the birthday is celebrated the next day. Festivals across all religions are celebrated with much fervor. Families are invited for these celebrations, which gives the employees a chance to be with their families and get to know their colleagues' families at the same time. Besides that, offices are decorated, sweets distributed & games played.

Akhand Path to Dandiya, Kite Flying to Practical Pranks...the ways to build camaraderie is limited only by one's imagination, and leaders of these teams do not lack imagination.

f. Communication

This is one managerial attribute which is perhaps the most significant, and perhaps the weakest in many managers. Communication includes the ability of the leader to communicate to the team member what is expected of him, keeping the team member informed about important issues & changes, and being accessible to her team members. Harley Davidson accentuates the last point in a symbolic way. They not only have an open door policy, in fact rooms in their offices do not have any doors!

In workshops that I do I have found two aspects of communication skills as particularly important for Indian managers – listening & observation skills, and feedback skills. The later involves being concrete (as opposed to beating around the bush), ability to confront when required, and knowing when to share personal insights and when to keep quiet.

While there is no rule, it is my observation that the outcome of some of the above managerial attributes is converting potential of team members into performance.

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