

REINVENTING LEADERSHIP

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SAM WALSH DIGS DEEP

Rio Tinto's iron ore
chief goes down
the data mine

DO YOU SUFFER THE
IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

MENTORING:
THE NEW RULES

HIGH
PERFORM
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ARUP'S
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Doing it for lo
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MORE

STORY CATHERINE FOX
AND NARELLE HOOPER

WITH LESS

HOW DO WE SQUEEZE MORE OUT OF SHRINKING ORGANISATIONAL RESOURCES? PEOPLE SKILLS DELIVER THE PRODUCTIVITY THAT HIGH-PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS ARE AIMING FOR.

There is more than enough evidence to show that economic uncertainty means most businesses automatically slash spending in areas such as employee learning and development and management training.

Equally evident from the latest studies on productivity in Australian business is the link between better performance and improving people management skills.

The data is clear: people skills are in fact the hard core of high performance. Behavioural skills are the key to improved productivity, academic and accountant Christine Boedker believes.

In fact, she says, the emphasis on high levels of technical skill in sectors such as accounting often leave young graduates without some of the basic people skills they need to succeed. And Boedker is particularly well-placed to understand this.

The lecturer in accounting at the Australian School of Business has been leading a three-year business research study that

looks at the links between leadership and organisational performance.

The research, funded by the federal government, involves 78 Australian companies and more than 5600 employees in the service sector. A report was released in 2011.

The high-performing workplaces identified in the research were up to three times more profitable – and up to 12 per cent

more productive – than some of their peers, the study found.

Defining what a high-performing workplace is involved bringing together a range of experts and has been a rewarding and cross-disciplinary journey, she says.

Leadership and innovation had the highest correlation with profitability and profit, the study found. There were five key areas for high performance: leadership, innovation, employee experience, customer focus and fairness.

“All of the areas had a connection with productivity and profitability,” she says. “We also saw that leadership was the area with the greatest impact.”

High performers understand leadership is something that happens at all levels of the organisation.

“Front-line managers can lead and initiate change and we captured those dimen-

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sions and that was quite important,” Boedker says. “At the lowest level, leaders are interfacing with customers, and front-line people had the greatest association with productivity.”

The findings mean organisations looking for levers to improve performance can start to think about where they invest and focus.

“We did some work with Microsoft,” she says. “They’re looking at all 900 staff and changing behaviour at all levels. You start off looking at the CEO and then realise you have to cascade down these behaviours to get to a higher level.”

We know it is about people management and being a good people manager – spending time with your people, supporting them and helping them reach their potential.

The thing about managing people is that we have to get past one of our big inbuilt biases. That is, most of us believe we do it well when the research shows we aren’t

FIVE FACTORS FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE

- ❖ LEADERSHIP
- ❖ INNOVATION (in products, services, processes, etc)
- ❖ EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE
(emotions, commitment, wellbeing)
- ❖ FAIRNESS (reward and procedures)
- ❖ CUSTOMER FOCUS

SOURCE: ske.org.au



necessarily as good as we think we are. It's a bit like driving a car – most people believe they're better at it than they are.

One important piece of the high performance jigsaw is opening opportunity for feedback and receptiveness to criticism. "We all have the need for feedback to become better at what we do," she says.

Although some executives bristle when told that their own employee research indicates a need to improve leadership and people skills, the link to better results is hard to deny. "We have some new data showing the differences between high and low-performing workplaces," she says. "It does pay off with (improving) leadership.

"The thing that's coming out is if we were able to lift the leadership skills of front-line managers from the bottom 10 per cent to the top-performing 10 per cent that would have a positive impact on EBIT [earnings before interest and tax] of 8.2 per cent. That's quite significant. But you don't do it overnight."

Boedker is working with five organisations at the moment going through what is known as an intervention stage – or the introduction of change programs.

"A lot of it is coming back to connections between people," she says. "We experience emotions at work as we do at home.

"Some of these companies are looking at the lack of positive emotions in the workplace and how people feel about each other."

In November, the researchers will re-survey the original participants to find out if there's been an improvement in productivity. There has been a great deal of interest in the findings, with particular attention paid to leadership, innovation, employee commitment and general wellbeing.

These areas are all interconnected, Boedker points out. "Without having the great

leadership, it's hard to have a good customer-focused workforce, if they're unhappy about the workplace," she says.

Those who are sceptical about the importance of the so-called soft skills often come around. "They can be a bit dismissive and some [executives] come back and say 'it's important'," she says. "But we've had internal sceptics and . . . put it to the board and they've allocated resources to people and leadership areas and are starting to put some numbers around it." **B**

SHARING THE LOVE

INVESTA PROPERTY group chairman Scott MacDonald had a surprise for the company's 230 employees in May.

Against a backdrop of redundancies in the property trust sector, the company handed out a \$5000 bonus as a thank you to non-executive

staff. MacDonald says it was a one-off payment to staff for working hard and helping to navigate through the financial crisis and a major refinancing.

"The bonus is both a celebration of success as well as a 'thank you' from the Investa board, the executive staff and its owner, Morgan Stanley," MacDonald says.

He says the positive impact on staff has lingered.

"The communication to staff focused on the great work our employees do every day," he says.

"Often they do not receive the recognition they deserve. It was unexpected and a big surprise."

Employees who had been at Investa for at least a year received the bonus, which was also paid pro-rata to part-time staff.

Executives receiving more than \$250,000 missed out.

THE FRAUD INSIDE

UNCERTAINTY AT WORK HAS LED TO AN EPIDEMIC OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN HIGH PERFORMERS. IT'S A CAREER KILLER. HERE ARE SOME TOOLS TO HELP.

IMPOSTER SYNDROME describes how otherwise sane and competent people develop a distorted self-belief that they're a fake. They're just waiting for everyone to discover the game is up – that someone will realise they are not up to the job and they'll be exposed as a fraud. And according to the experts, it is worst among high performers and those with a high drive to succeed.

The current business environment is contributing to a recent outbreak. Author and corporate adviser Suzanne Mercier says

imposter syndrome is latent until triggered. One of the biggest triggers is uncertainty. Given that this accurately describes today's corporate climate, it's no surprise the incidence of the syndrome, described in the following case studies, is on the increase.

CASE ONE

IN A rare moment of honesty, Mr B would perhaps have described himself as "tricky"; an appropriate shorthand for his mercurial nature and changeable, volatile and erratic behaviour. He would also have described himself as a strategist – always double thinking, omitting information and

playing people off against each other. He needed to be "one step ahead of the game". His motto: trust no one and take no prisoners.

In feedback reviews, peers would describe him as "thorough, efficient, serious, diligent". Those who reported to him would peg him as "bordering on hostile, unreadable and unpredictable". Certainly not approachable, and not the kind of boss staff would "bounce things off" or reveal any difficulties to. So he provided no safety for his team, which resulted in a lack of cohesion, and a lack of respect towards himself and the culture of fear over which he ruled.

Still infuriated at why he was suddenly ordered to the human resources department, he arrived late, to be informed of the



issue. This was his third work-related door-slamming episode. People had not only noticed such actions, they were tired of it and were complaining of such aggressive behaviour.

He responded with a familiar, somewhat chilling, contemptuous silence. Time passed, followed by his inevitable question: "So, what are you going to do about it?"

His indignation was palpable, although the subtext was "I feel vulnerable, out of control, revealed ... and now I need someone to lash out at".

Undeterred by the hostility, the HR executive called in her superior and together they explained the process of warnings. Feeling sideswiped and victimised, he stormed towards the exit and slammed the door with rage. He didn't help his cause.

CASE TWO



Ms C looked the part: black on black with just a subtle hint of colour – not too much to be too interesting, just enough to be noticed; the quiet, understated elegance of someone of her status. She entered the meeting with a considered stride and with just the hint of a smile; neither a sincere nor inviting one.

When called upon she was articulate and knowledgeable, clear and precise. To the others present there was no doubt that she was an equal among her peers and respected by her superiors.

At the end of the meeting, she left the room, discreetly disappeared to a different floor of the building, and headed purposefully towards the toilets. Behind the locked door, she trembled, hands clammy, overcome with confusion, panic and doubt, fearing she'd throw up.

She sat and waited for this episode to pass. How could she return to her office in such a pathetic manner? She feared she was going mad and a part of her wished to be dead – just for the relief of this facade to stop. Surely this time she had been caught out. Surely this time her insurmountable flaws were obvious to all. It had been only a matter of time.

Eventually, she was composed enough to return to her floor, her office, her desk. In time, the cycle would play out again.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

These are composite cases outlined by Sydney psychotherapist Tom Downey, who is concerned at the rising number of cases he and colleagues are dealing with. Downey describes it as a silent epidemic because people tend to suffer in isolation.

The expression "imposter syndrome" was first identified by researchers Pauline



When the criteria for success change, it can feel like a set-up when you don't tell staff why.

Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes at Georgia State University in the 1970s. Subsequent studies found it is not gender-specific. Indeed, it's estimated that more than 70 per cent of people experience the feeling at one time or another.

Stress levels are very high in Australian organisations at present, Mercier says.

Companies need to respond rapidly, so some level of uncertainty is part of the corporate terrain.

"In a changing environment a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity are important for creativity. But excessive and unnecessary

uncertainty creates that feeling of not being sure where things are going," she says.

That tips a majority of people into a negative reaction in order to restore their feeling of control. Some people take their bat and ball and go home "or they go into dysfunctional behaviours designed to help them feel more in control". They become toxic to themselves and those around them.

Mercier, who years ago walked away from a successful career in advertising because of this, has written a book titled *Liberate Leadership: how the imposter syndrome undermines leadership capability and what to do about it*.

She has outlined some rules for managers to help reduce unnecessary uncertainty.

- Be as transparent as possible: employees feel included, appreciated and respected when we let them know what is going on within the organisation and marketplace.
- Be fair in your dealings with employees: don't give some special treatment and not extend it to others. This shows up as bosses who are allowed to get away with inappropriate, abusive and even bullying behaviour.
- Consistency in culture and behaviour: if you tell employees your values are integrity and respect, for example, then be sure your behaviour reflects those values. What are the unwritten rules?
- Setting employees up for failure: poor delegation and micro-managing undermine confidence. Similarly, promoting someone then not giving them support to succeed is damaging.
- Moving the goal posts and changing the rules: most employees get that markets move fast and strategies need to meet that. However, when organisations change the direction of the organisation, or change the criteria for success, for example, it can feel like a set-up when you don't tell staff why, or how to win in the new context.

"We encourage leaders to ask themselves what creates an environment of perfect tension that encourages people to bring their best game to resolve that tension," Mercier writes. "By comparison, what creates such a level of uncertainty that it brings about paralysis because people feel they just aren't good enough to deliver in that environment? Address these areas." **B**

