

Why Companies Need Positive Disturbances

It's a do or die situation. Companies desperately need to recruit employees who'll question when something wrong happens within an organization, or face the threat of extinction says Sam Swaminathan.

Here's a little question to tickle the managerial mind: What do you think of the suggestion that employees should follow the policy of keeping their lips sealed when they see something going wrong within the organization?

I think it is safe to assume that most of us would be quite horrified by such a suggestion. This would mean that staff have no commitment, no sense of belonging, and don't really care beyond their pay checks.

Great, that is gratifying. Who in his sane mind would think otherwise? If this be true, employees ought to be questioning policies, procedures, behaviors, and actions that clearly indicate serious flaws in their organizations.

Fine, in that case this must be happening every day at every work- place. Right? Wrong. The real question to ask is: Does it happen? And if ever it happens, how often is that? Why is this so? To answer this question we have to step back for a moment and go to the beginning of organizational relationships with their staff. So let's take a look at the way in which we hire people.

We write out meticulous job specifications, advertise or head- hunt or do some such thing to get suitable candidates in through the door for an interview. The interview process itself is well thought out, and the more enlightened companies take great care to do a good job of it.

Finally, you pick your guy, and make him/her an offer, which he/ she accepts. The going is great until now. The problem begins hereafter.

This well-meaning person joins with great enthusiasm, and goes about learning the ropes. He even identifies certain areas of improvement. He wants to suggest them to the boss. And that's the beginning of the end. Things begin to go awry from this

point. He walks in with great enthusiasm, brimming with ideas, and he gets a cold shoulder. The boss, of course, doesn't have time for these suggestions.

Now, just think about the environment in which companies currently operate. Do the old rules of business apply? No, not by a mile. Unfortunately, though company chiefs talk about all the changes around them, they say it more as a fad than as a serious issue for thoughtful consideration.

In reality then, some head honchos don't realize the real impact of the rules being changed; others who do don't know what to do about these changes. What is more fear of an uncertain perhaps required at the top is and unpredictable future.

Fear, after all, spurs us into action – even if it is merely fight or flight. The speed of change is so frightfully quick that it is almost impossible to anticipate it every time. You figure that it has happened after it has happened.

But there is one way of anticipating these changes. They happen in the marketplace, quietly at first, and then with a suddenness that can stop an oncoming freight train. Who recognizes these imperceptible changes first? Obviously, the guys closest to them. And who are these guys? Not CEOs, not finance managers, not HR managers, nor quality managers. More often than not, these are the front-line people. Now, they will tell you about these market shifts if you allow them. Andy Grove of Intel calls them Company Cassandras in his book 'Only The Paranoid Survive.'

These Cassandras are either front-line people or middle managers whose feet are firmly planted on earth. These people meet disgruntled customers, learn about delays in deliveries, new products or services about to be launched by the competition. Such people can tell you about the departmental climate better than any climate survey. For sure, it is quite lousy to hear such things about your organization and the competition for people at the top. But this is what positive disturbances are all about. What would you really prefer, to be blissfully unaware of the unpleasant realities and get blown, or hear about them and do something quick?

Why then do so many companies get worked up the wrong way when they hear bad news? Shooting the messenger is the easiest way out (and the most foolish one). Listen to Andy Grove again, 'it takes many years of consistent conduct to eliminate fear of punishment. It takes only one incident to introduce it. News of this incident

will spread through the organization like wildfire and shut everyone up."

Top management has a responsibility to inspire managers to be passionate about their work. This passion includes delivering the truth good and bad in a timely manner, without holding back anything. Inspiration alone may or may not work. Put in place a set of metrics that will encourage positive disturbances, by everyone. Implement a set of processes that will carefully monitor how managers themselves are performing on this score. Are they actively encouraging positive disturbance within their departments? Set up a 'Positive disturbance wisdom group' whose job it will be to foster positive disturbance within the bowels of the corporation.

Their job will be a critical one, indeed. Why? Just think about it – for every overt initiative installed by the management, a dozen covert initiatives will unknowingly be born to counter the original initiative. Members of the wisdom group would be like gladiators, roving around the organization, watching for telltale signs of these covert stop signs. They would then move in to adroitly dis- member such actions, and put the initiative back on track.

The experience of consultants is no different. Organizations hire consultants to assist in implementing some significant change. As long as the consultant keeps smiling and parroting how good things are, he/she gets more work, and more revenue.

Some clients even go to the extent of telling consultants that they have been hired to do a piece of work, no more, no less. Gee, that is terrible. A committed consultant will convey the news, both good and bad, even at the risk of losing the client's business.

One might argue that consultants ought to exercise greater savvy while dishing out the bad news. On the other hand, if the consultant has been hired to catalyze certain changes, then the role is clearly one of providing positive disturbance. You can have that much of frozen smiles and nice words. If the job is not getting done, what would a client really want? If it were my money, I would certainly root for asking the consultant to cut the cackle, and come out with the facts, no matter how painful they might be. If the truth is mainly bad news, so be it. I would thank the consultant and even pay the guy a bonus for being forthright.

But no, that would be absurd. Real value addition is often not appreciated. The absurdity is heightened further when one examines the role of the provider of the

disturbance. After all, this person is staking his reputation and peace of mind by creating the disturbance. And, let's face it it doesn't take a nuclear scientist to figure out whether the disturbance is really positive or not.

At the end of the day it's up to the company to decide how to go about encouraging positive disturbance. And a final thought. Remember Hamlet?

Here's something from that masterpiece:

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

POLONIUS: By the mass, and is like a camel, indeed.

HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.

POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.

HAMLET: Or like a whale?

POLONIUS: Very like a whale. – Hamlet Act III, Scene 2

What happens to Polonius in the play? He is stabbed from behind the curtain. Even the bard had warned us about the fate of yesmen way back in the 1500s!

So do companies need hard-to- find providers of positive disturbance or the readily available Polonius kind of people?

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