

Practices that sustain workplace productivity

By
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Anything that is successful and popular at one time is, often, anything but successful and popular in the future. Similarly, organisations that are flourishing now will frequently decline later. Ironically, the factors that often promote success and improve performance now - specific goals, steep targets, relentless accountability and efficient procedures for example tend to compromise the sustainability of these organisations. Their apparent uniqueness becomes their ultimate weakness.

To demonstrate, many organisations introduce a raft of policies that are intended to motivate employees, compelling these individuals to dedicate unmitigated effort into their work. The targets that employees need to achieve are elevated, sometimes exponentially. Their capacity to reach these targets dictates their remuneration and reputation. The behaviour of employees, and the resources they utilize, are monitored closely, enabling managers to uncover and eradicate all redundancies, deficiencies, and inefficiencies.

Initially, these uncompromising policies enhance productivity and improve many of the key indices of workplace performance: return on investment, the price of shares, and market share. Nevertheless, after some delay - sometimes a few months, sometimes several years - these organisations usually begin to wane.

Several factors contribute to this decline in productivity, profitability, and market share. Interestingly, employees seldom ascend or transcend traditional practices when their performance is monitored closely.

In particular, steep targets, close surveillance, streamlined practices, rigid directives, and bounded autonomy all conspire to compromise innovation and progress. These characteristics of the workplace infringe upon the autonomy of employees. Research undertaken by Dr. Simon Moss at Monash University has revealed that intriguingly, when autonomy is constrained unduly, a circuit in the brain that facilitates creativity, called extension memory, is inhibited. When this circuit is activated, individuals can more readily uncover remote associations between concepts. Solutions that might not seem immediately pertinent, or possibilities that might not appear especially likely, are unexpectedly evoked in these individuals. Their capacity to reflect upon original, novel, and fresh solutions to enduring, intractable, and important problems thus improves, dramatically and immediately.

Organisations that compel employees to exert themselves vigorously and incessantly inhibit this circuit and stifle creativity. Practices, policies, processes, products, and services remain conventional not innovative. The organisation does not accommodate the inexorable changes to the market and industry. They do not adapt effectively when the needs of customers or the practices of rivals evolve. As recent studies attest, these organisations are especially likely to decline in competitive and dynamic markets.

If organisations impose steep, prescriptive targets, and therefore inhibit extension memory, not only does innovation decline, but many other capabilities also deteriorate. First, when this circuit is inhibited, employees become less resilient - more anxious, agitated, belligerent, or rebellious - in response to looming changes in the workplace. These employees feel vulnerable not robust, and uncertain not secure. When initiatives are introduced or procedures are amended, this insecurity is often manifested as defiance or antagonism. Changes are mocked and suggestions are rejected, magnifying the inability of these organisations to accommodate variations in the market or industry.

In addition to this aversion to change, the employees become more likely to reach unsuitable decisions. When individuals feel their autonomy has been encroached, and extension memory is inhibited, they cannot invoke their intuition to decide which alternatives to pursue. They become more likely to reach decisions they will regret - decisions that neglect some key considerations or vital factors. Unsuitable products are launched, ineffective equipment is purchased, inappropriate practices are instituted, and inept applicants are employed.

Perhaps more importantly, and most inevitably, the individuals at these organisations become more inclined to experience exhaustion and burnout, ultimately curbing motivation and elevating turnover of employees. Whenever organisations introduce policies, such as

an incentive scheme or appraisal system, that are intended to augment the effort that employees invest in their work, these individuals are less likely to experience a sense of engagement. They experience none of the excitement, enthusiasm, absorption, and passion that many individuals at other organisations enjoy.

Instead, when targets are steep and when lofty standards are enforced, employees need to suppress some of their impulses or intuitions. The obligation to inhibit these inclinations consumes some form of mental energy or resource, the depletion of which provokes burnout and exhaustion. Employees who experience this burnout are not negligent, delicate, indulgent, or undisciplined; these individuals are merely victims of the inevitable aftermath that ensues when humans need to suppress many of their impulses over an extended period of time. These employees, together with their unique insights and valuable skills, leave prematurely.

Some organisations thrive, even without attempting to elevate the effort that employees invest in their work. One of their services might fortuitously complement a recent trend in the market; one of their competitors might have collapsed unexpectedly; one of their managers might have invented a viable product. Even the success of these organisations is often transient rather than enduring.

In particular, when managers feel they have succeeded—when they feel their organization is flourishing - they become more inclined to reach unsuitable decisions. As scientific research demonstrates, managers who feel they have triumphed in the past are more likely to commit inadvisably to initiatives or programs that are obviously floundering. Rather than abandon these initiatives, these managers tend to persist needlessly with unsuccessful advertising campaigns, maligned products, ineffective training programs, and obsolete management practices. Their undeniable confidence in themselves manifests as unsuitable confidence in their decisions.

Managers of thriving organisations not only persist imprudently with ineffective initiatives but also overlook imminent hazards and threats. When managers feel shrouded in success, their attention is often diverted from potential complications. Their focus unwittingly shifts from possible impediments to inspiring opportunities. They neglect key threats and possible difficulties - difficulties that other individuals would have anticipated and eradicated.

Fortunately, the success of organisations and managers does not inevitably guarantee impending failure. Sustainable success is possible and unfolds when several criteria are fulfilled.

Recommendations for Sustainable Workplace Productivity:

First, the intuition of employees needs to be trusted not eschewed. Employees should not have to justify every suggestion, every decision, and every act rationally and carefully. The exclusive reliance on systematic, logical, and rational arguments, rather than intuition and instincts, has been shown, in a series of studies, to compromise complex decisions as well as to inhibit extension memory - the source of creativity, resilience, and engagement.

Second, employees should be encouraged to pursue their core values especially during, not before or after, demanding periods. In particular, employees should be invited to identify a series of values: the qualities they would like to develop, the communities they would like to assist, the injustices they would like to redress, the reputation they would like to cultivate, the position they would like to secure, and the spiritual beliefs they would like to pursue. When stressed, employees should be granted the opportunity to enact behaviours that align with these values or aspirations. If these opportunities are granted, individuals gradually become more resilient during stressful periods. This resilience also tends to activate extension memory, facilitating creativity, intuition, and engagement.

Third, managers should never use labels to characterise employees. Employees should never be described as a “big picture person”, a “numbers man”, a “tough woman”, or indeed anything that implies some enduring core or trait. Allusions to these traits have been shown to reinforce the belief that competence, intelligence, skill, character, or temperament are immutable and fixed, not malleable and flexible. When employees assume, either consciously or unconsciously, that such qualities are immutable, they become more sensitive to criticisms and more resistant to changes. Extension memory is also inhibited, and innovation, decision making, and persistence thus diminish.

Fourth, employees should be encouraged to recognise and concede their flaws - to appreciate that many of the strengths also tend to manifest as limitations. For example, individuals who are disciplined are often inflexible; individuals who are extraverted are sometimes inconsiderate. When employees and managers embrace, rather than conceal, their deficiencies, they feel less vulnerable and exposed, which also activates extension memory. They are then well placed to develop these limitations.

The key to success is not merely striving to succeed. Employees who are granted the autonomy, the confidence, and the conditions to pursue their core values, without interference or surveillance, will flourish, and ultimately enhance the success of their organisation - a success that is both sustainable and fulfilling.

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