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The Case for Inclusiveness

By Jim Selman



The idea of creating organizational cultures in which people naturally include other people, particularly those different from themselves, is a laudable social objective.

Notwithstanding this, accomplishing this kind of social objective is not and should not be a major priority of

business. This statement may seem somewhat radical; however, many organizational leaders of late have lost sight of the fact that the sole *raison d'être* for any business enterprise must be the bottom line—maximum return-on-investment from producing maximum customer satisfaction. In a word, business must maximize business results—everything else is a means to that end.

Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a variety of people-oriented leadership initiatives that have tended to occupy the corporate spotlight and call for changes to the 'paradigm' or culture or 'mindsets' of the employees. We have heard numerous proposals and approaches for 'empowering' employees and/or creating powerful teams, reinventing the workplace, or building 'coaching cultures' designed to have breakthroughs in results. The problem with all of these approaches is that we have been unable to implement or sustain most of what they offer. At the end of the day, they become interesting experiments, occasionally boost morale, and perhaps have a positive impact on some individuals, but overall they have not generated concrete and sustainable results, and in fact have tended to increase cynicism of managerial attempts to behave in more humane and, for many, in more ethical ways.

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This generalization is not a function of the various ideas and models and approaches offered by consultants, academics and in-house proponents of change. We suspect that many of the approaches suggested over the years from a wide variety of sources are ‘right on’ in both articulating the problems and in the solutions they offer.

The traditional ‘command and control’ styles of management will, at best, produce results in the short-term. The more ‘people-centered’ methodologies, however, can be expensive and consume substantial amounts of time without translating into hard measurable results or changes in the corporate culture. As indicated earlier, the potential backlash is that so-called ‘soft’ initiatives are met with cynicism and resignation that this will be yet another “flavor of the month” solution to intractable problems.

We propose a very different approach to accomplish the ‘good intentions’ of many laudable “human resources culture-change efforts” within the context of a hard business agenda. Specifically, we believe that **it is both possible and necessary to accomplish good business results at the same time as creating a positive impact on the quality of people’s work life experience.** This can only be accomplished by shifting the cultural context and objectives back to the business agenda.

We call this shift ‘inclusiveness’ because **it is only by ‘including’ whatever it is that we normally resist that we are able to move directly into action.** The alternative is to become bogged down in unproductive discussion and debate of externalities and issues beyond the scope of the business agenda. For example, consider a typical corporate problem such as people

complaining about lack of women or other minority groups in the organization. In some cases, this complaint is reinforced by social legislation requiring affirmative action plans. Parallels can be drawn between this example and many others, including areas of health and safety, the environment and employee ‘rights’ in the workplace. Business leaders are rarely against these areas of concern or against the concepts, ideas or common sense values relating to improving the quality of people’s lives and our collective environment, but they may not see the benefits of these activities on the ‘bottom line’. The issue for business leaders isn’t one of what is good or bad, but “What is the cost and what is the business result?”

Business leaders want results—period.

They are also committed to a whole list of human values, including creating opportunities for people, developing people’s potential, leading their organizations to be healthy and productive workplaces, along with being good corporate citizens. From this perspective, leadership isn’t about making trade-offs between concrete results and the ‘softer’ areas of business enterprise, but about creatively addressing breakdowns relating to these ‘softer’ areas in a manner that increases business results.

Barbara Annis and ParaComm Partners have been leaders in assisting clients to create organizational culture change, particularly related to ‘gender issues’ and other aspects of diversity. In our experience, **projects succeed when the clients are primarily committed to hard business results and are only committed to human resource initiatives as a secondary concern.** From this perspective, the *lack* or *absence* of diversity may be a



breakdown for some people (meaning the organization isn't where they want it to be in that area), but it is not necessarily a problem that calls for immediate action by business leaders.

If the lack of diversity is viewed as a breakdown in the context of the primary business commitment to results, the question shifts from “What is wrong?” to one of “What is missing?” to enhance results, while at the same time improving our mix of minority representation or participation. We should not blame business leaders or the corporate culture for all the inequities in the workplace, or within society...instead, we can generate a reality in which if people have a social agenda for the workplace they can accomplish it by increasing business results.

This approach of focusing on business results first has often opened insights into other questions such as what can we *produce* if we are more broadly integrated that we cannot produce if we are not. For example, in one organization the question of expanding gender diversity shifted from one of “including women because it is the right thing to do” to “What sensibilities do women have that we can leverage for more results?”

Finally, in a results-driven culture—regardless of the values under discussion—everyone has an obligation to become personally responsible for results. Patterns of finger-pointing, being victims of a strong authoritarian leader, or participation in unproductive ‘hallway’ conversations tend to disappear and be replaced by people ‘owning’ results and working more effectively in the interest of common commitments.

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