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HR in the Gulf Region:

COLLABORATION DOESN'T HAPPEN ON ITS OWN

By Dave Millner

MR. MILLNER: Hi, I'm Dave Millner and I wanted to talk about collaboration and the fact that it doesn't happen on its own. Although some organizations have invested in team development activity, within teams, I've seen very few organizations, especially in the gulf region, who have taken seriously the fact that collaborative team building between teams is just as important. There is so much scope here for more effective working that can ultimately only improve the bottom line, and yet it seems to be ignored as a business critical activity. If most organizations, for example, could just improve communication and cooperation between different functions, it would make a significant impact upon the engagement of the workforce, the ease with which things get done, let alone the efficiency and productivity implications that could result in increased profitability.

The drive to improve any form of teamwork usually comes in response to an outside pressure or challenge. This can be competitive challenges or pressures or margins, for example, that demands increased flexibility and improve commercial results. In a truly business-orientated organization, will demand excellent cooperation and involvement both within and between different work groups. This cooperation is fundamental to getting business done, especially as organizational structures become more and more complex.

Leaders need to think about the processes operating between people and groups. There must be clear communication of what people need from each other, and also what they don't need, and in this way that can then really start to eliminate unnecessary work. This way of thinking is difficult for leaders who may have operated for a long time in a culture where these activities were either absent or not really required. But the focus upon organizational results and how each functional business unit contributes to the whole picture, collaborative behaviors have to become more prominent if your function is to deliver in line with, or indeed exceed expectations. Now these are all fine words, but collaboration isn't easy, particularly as cooperation between groups can be difficult. I found that these challenges revolve around probably four areas.

Firstly, leaders lack the confidence in their influencing skills, and they fear making things worse by having to show their possible weaknesses to other leaders and functions. More collaborative organizations do make actions and results more transparent and obvious to more people. And that's something that's just going to happen more and more.

Secondly, leaders don't naturally find it easy to seek feedback about how others in the organization see their function, their business unit, maybe even themselves. They may also find it hard to offer feedback to other people in case it may have repercussions upon them. Leaders don't seem well-versed or trained about how to create cooperation between groups or to be more collaborative. Working with a team of people can be hard, let alone work with people who are based in a different location, a different function, a different region, or indeed, a different country.

Finally, leaders may not have received sufficient active encouragement or permission from their executive to work in this way to resolve business challenges together. Don't they say that power is control, and the idea of working with others who don't directly report into you could be perceived that you're losing control? My way of looking at it is that you're receiving input in different points of view into a challenge that may mean you come up with a far better solution than if you just dealt with that issue in isolation.

If you want to improve teamwork in between teams, it's crucial to identify the key business linkages across the organization, and work with leaders and their staff to really see how those can be used to improve business performance. You can always devise training for

people in influencing and change skills that underpin those collaborative behaviors. But training alone isn't the answer. I've always found that rewarding leaders and staff and changing their approach is a far more sustainable strategy. And if you ensure that joint or shared targets are introduced, whereby it can't be achieved without the other team's support, it's amazing how quickly behavior changes. Strange that, isn't that really?

Now it's not easy to work collaboratively, and support from the top of any organization is important to changing attitudes in this respect. A lot of organizations are leaner than they were this time last year. And it will take some significant business growth to encourage expenditure and resources to the previous level that were seen. In which case, use the resources that you have in a smarter way. Collaboration makes jobs more challenging. Yes I know, but it also makes them far more interesting. And when people are interested, they are more engaged, and guess what, they perform better. Talented people will always see the benefits of this approach, and that's why they'll make it work. So the question I pose to you is, "Are you one of those smart, talented people that can see why it pays to collaborate?"

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