



THE PARADOX OF PERFORMANCE – CAN YOU HAVE A HIGH PERFORMANCE CULTURE AND A GREAT PLACE TO WORK?

By Debbie Craig & John Gatherer

Introduction

When exploring the definitions of paradox, originally a paradox was merely a view which contradicted accepted opinion. However in more recent times, the concept has evolved into new meaning – an apparently self-contradictory (even absurd) statement, situation or proposition which on closer inspection is found to contain a truth reconciling the conflicting opposites.

In Chinese philosophy "yin and yang", is used to describe how polar opposites or contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they impact on each other.



One of the greatest challenges to individuals navigating the rapidly changing, uncertain white waters of life is to become adept at 'riding the waves', staying on top and finding a balance between the many paradoxes and conflicts that we face in day-to-day life. Jim Collins the author of Good to Great came up with an interesting phrase called the "genius of AND and the tyranny of OR." It is often not about making a choice between two opposing paths of action, but about finding a balance between two different ends of the same continuum.

We have seen this in many of the highly effective people with whom we have worked that have a good understanding of yin and yang – they can be shy and fearless, are highly conceptual as well as attending to detail, display empathy and be tough, be strategic and operational.

Building capability for high performance, high engagement organisations

If your intention is to create a high performance and high engagement workplace, there is an interesting and sometimes complex paradox to understand and balance. Leaders need to understand both aspects of the paradox and their role in developing and driving the right culture, behaviour and practices for short-term results and long-term success.

The capabilities required for managers and leaders in these turbulent yet fascinating times of transformation and change are as follows:

High Performance Organisation	Great place to work
<u>High Performance</u> Innovative and strategic thinking Strategic alignment and traction Structure and role alignment Talent management Change management Culture transformation	<u>Great Place</u> Transformational leadership Engagement Enablement Empowerment Leading high performance teams Holding Crucial Conversations

Throughout business research and literature there is a significant focus on BOTH high performance organisations AND high engagement organisations, or alternatively called great places to work. In our leadership programs we ask the question: Can you have BOTH a high performance and a high engagement workplace? The ensuing debates are usually vigorous and dynamic.

*"We're so focused on getting the job done (sales generated, products produced, costs contained) that anything that distracts from that takes a back seat. We know in our hearts that recognition works but it's a distraction."
Ben Eubanks*

One group will argue that a high performance organisation necessitates a very disciplined, focussed, no frills approach to work, with stretch targets and a strong performance management that allows no slackers or room for mistakes.

A second group will argue that an engaging work environment requires space for individuality, time for deeper discussions about purpose, motivation, potential and environments that facilitate greater socialisation. In this kind of environment, there is less pressure to perform in the short-term but more flexibility for people to find their unique area of talent and contribution and engage with energy and enthusiasm over the longer term.

Can these two opposing cultures be reconciled?

A third group will argue that you cannot have one without the other. People will really feel engaged when they are working with other high performing individuals in effective teams sharing fairly in the rewards. The right kind of high performance culture will attract people that are motivated by achievement and stretch targets and who will craft out their contribution whilst delivering the results in creative and innovative ways.

Any of these arguments hold true depending on the culture that is created, shaped and role modelled by the leaders of the organisation. In these scenarios, ***culture and leadership*** are the distinguishing factors represented by the standards and practices of recruitment, on-boarding, performance and reward management, leadership development, innovation, communication, meeting behaviour, etc.

Leading high performance organisations

The first step is to understand the ***strategic context*** of the world of work such as trends, scenarios and opportunities and challenges and how they may impact the business. Then against this backdrop, assess the organisation against the ***building blocks of high performance*** to really understand strengths and areas requiring attention. This also engages leaders to buy into the need for change in their approach and focus.



Leaders need to continually expand their ***innovative and strategic thinking*** capability and work with tools to challenge assumptions, paradigms and processes to build a culture of innovation and healthy risk tolerance. A huge challenge for most leaders today is how to allocate time between strategic and operational activities and being able to differentiate and prioritise accordingly.

Strategic alignment involves building a shared, purposeful vision for the future and ensuring buy-in and commitment at all levels of the organisation. This is achieved through facilitating strategic alignment sessions and using simple one-page templates to involve people in building strategic objectives, measures and values to support the culture and journey of change right down to the individual and team level.

People often underestimate the importance and impact of an effective **structure** aligned to the strategy **and role** clarity at all levels and in between functions and teams. The leader's role includes a regular review of the structures and roles to ensure the value stream from customer to delivery flows efficiently, optimises cross functional communication and collaboration and empowers people to perform at the right level. With this focus, common pitfalls such as over-laps, gaps, mis-alignment, operating at the wrong level and missed collaboration opportunities can be avoided. The challenges of managing in matrix structures and in multiple roles are also important to share and explore ways that work.

The leader's role in finding, growing and keeping talent to ensure the right people, with the right skills are in the right roles cannot be emphasised enough. **Talent management** is not an HR function, but a line function supported by HR. Leaders need to understand the tools, processes and skills to identify talent, do succession planning and actively look out for talent inside and outside the organisation.



Too many managers and leaders take **change** for granted and still operate under the old command and control style of leadership which forces change down into the organisation with much unnecessary pain, resistance and delays. Every leader needs to understand the processes and tools to accelerate change and the leader's role in optimise engagement and commitment and building capacity and resilience for on-going change. Leader's need to

learn how to plan strategically for change, the skills required to be change sponsors and champions and to facilitate individual and group communication and mobilisation sessions effectively.

Culture transformation cannot be left to chance. Culture is the sum total of role models, leadership style, communication, processes and practices, past history, structures, power and politics and rituals and symbols. Each of these need to be reviewed for cultural impact and actively managed to instil the memories, beliefs, values and behaviours required for a high performance, high engagement culture. Every leader needs to learn to be a culture strategist, advocate, coach, confronter, facilitator and role model.

Leading high engagement organisations

The first place to start is to understand the **dimensions of a great place to work** and how we stack up against them. Do we really know what engages and motivates different people? Do we know what motivates unique individuals and how to gain psychological commitment to the organisation? What is

good attrition vs. unnecessary turnover? Are people joining, staying or leaving for the right reasons? All of these are important to explore and understand the leader's role in creating a GREAT place to work and to manage the paradox of high performance and high engagement.

Whilst many leaders have attended development programs over the years, leadership style and walking the talk is still a major complaint of employees. Self-awareness of personal behaviours, habits, mind-sets and impact is critical for effective leadership. Leaders need to move beyond positional power and utilise the power of full engagement across the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual spectrums. Leaders need to read, explore, debate and understand how to **inspire, motivate and involve people** to be committed partners along the strategic journey and how to work as a dynamic and aligned leadership team.

All leaders need to truly believe that **Engagement** drives commitment which drives performance and retention. Emotional commitment is the extent to which employee's value, enjoy, and believe in their companies. Rational commitment is the extent to which they believe it is in their best interests to stay. Improving employee commitment leads to greater discretionary effort and reduces the probability of departure by as much as 87%. (Corporate Leadership Council). These factors can be significantly influenced in the workplace by the type and quality of conversation that leaders are able to hold with their staff to connect with, motivate and engage them.

"Traditional organisations are profit maximizers not purpose maximizers" Dan Pink



Enablement involves the leader's role in optimising potential, competence and confidence to build capability for improved performance and desired results. There is a process aspect

including understanding the building blocks of competencies and how to assess strengths and opportunities for development. There is also a coaching aspect which involves understanding how people learn and change and the coaching and conversation skills to create insight and growth in others. These are deep skills that take time to learn and practice but are critical for leaders to engage and enable their teams.

Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowerment includes having the authority to make decisions, the timely and accurate information to make the right decisions, the resources to implement decisions (budget, equipment, training), and the accountability where each person knows that they are responsible for the results and consequences. Each leader has a unique style which can be assessed against an empowerment framework. Mind-sets and competencies need to be identified and developed to enhance empowerment such as delegation and letting go, encouraging initiative and ensuring accountability.

Conclusion

So, back to the question: Can you have a high performance culture and a great place to work? When shareholders are putting pressure on executives for short-term results, is there time for effective leadership conversations? When a previous high performer is struggling in a new role, is there time for settling in and figuring it out? When an operating facility is not producing the numbers, is there still time for the conversation cafe on values or taking time off the job to learn more advanced problem solving skills? These are some of the interesting questions that leaders need to ask themselves and find the best way to manage the short-term whilst engaging and empowering people for the long-term. Good Luck!

Factor	Description	Rating
Great company	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Does the company have a meaningful purpose which is clear to everyone? 2. Do you assist employees align their dreams with the company vision and purpose? 3. Does the company have a reputation as a great place to work? 4. Do you promote the company's reputation to your team? 5. Do you create opportunities for employees to make a difference to society through company activities 	
Great culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you have a company culture statement with values and behaviours i.e. integrity, trust, respect? 2. Do you encourage a climate of open communication, teamwork, diversity, healthy conflict and fun? 3. Do you create opportunities for team building, honest conversations, sharing ideas and innovation? 4. Do you address counter culture behaviour through honest feedback, coaching and clear consequences? 5. Do you encourage social interaction to build relationships between team members and departments 	
Great careers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you ensure alignment between company strategy and each role through effective performance management? 2. Do you create roles and work assignments that are interesting, challenging, balanced and flexible? 3. Do you create space for young talent i.e.. development positions, removing deadline and pipeline blockages? 4. Do you give key talent opportunities to gain exposure and test their potential across multiple business units? 5. Do you encourage a healthy work-life balance to optimise energy and outputs 	
Great leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you have a leadership style that is appropriate to the organisation and culture? 2. Do you inspire engagement and commitment through caring, coaching and developing people? 3. Do you spend sufficient strategic and transformational activities and delegate operational activities downwards? 4. Are you aware of your own leadership competency strengths and development areas and have appropriate actions to develop these? 5. Are you passionate about people and drive the creation of a great place to work? 	
Great rewards	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you recognise and appreciate high quality contributions, efforts and results? 2. Do you differentiate rewards based on superior performance? 3. Do you offer flexible and creative non-financial rewards such as access to coaching, development programs and assignments, stretch assignments, conferences and best practice visits, flexible work arrangements? 4. Does the company offer long-term Incentives to mission critical positions and key talent 5. Do you help create the perception that remuneration is benchmarked and fair 	
Engagement, enablement, empowerment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are employees engaged with as individuals and responded to with flexible options according to their needs and aspirations? 2. Are career opportunities and development paths clearly mapped out for core functions 3. Do employees have personal development plans and access to coaching, mentoring and development programs to improve competence? 4. Are employees empowered with clear decision making guidelines and appropriate levels of autonomy? 5. Do employees have sufficient resources, equipment and support to fulfil their roles? 	

Source: The high engagement organisation assessment developed by Catalyst Consulting



SOURCES: Collins, J. 2001. *Good to great*. New York: Harper Collins.; Pink D.H. 2009. *Drive: The surprising truth what motivates us*. Penguin Group

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DEBBIE CRAIG

Debbie has over 18 years' experience in the field of strategy, leadership development, change management, talent management, high performance teams and organisational development. She has worked and consulted at leading local and global organisations in the private and public sector throughout Southern Africa and internationally in the UK, Australia, South East Asia, China, South America and the USA. Debbie is a skilled strategist, design architect, team builder, a powerful facilitator, change agent and executive coach. Her passion is transformation and empowerment which she facilitates through individual coaching and empowerment workshops, team-development workshops, corporate training and consulting assignments and organisation wide strategic change interventions. Debbie is the founder and Managing Director of Catalyst Consulting which she has grown into a successful consulting company with her business partner, John Gatherer.

Debbie has published a book, "I am Talent", on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous articles, appeared on radio talk shows and presented at conferences.



JOHN GATHERER

John has over 38 years' experience in the fields of HR, labour relations, training and development, leadership and strategic change management, having held senior and executive positions in Anglo American plc. and the De Beers Groups. John joined Debbie Craig at Catalyst Consulting as Principal Consultant, specialising in strategic change, leadership development, talent management and executive coaching, working locally and internationally. John brings a deep and practical knowledge and expertise to his roles as facilitator, consultant and organization development specialist as well his ability to think strategically and design innovative solutions. John has managed large scale people management projects and transformation journeys in Africa, Asia, China, the UK, India, Kuwait, Australia and the USA.

John has co-authored a book, "I am Talent" with Debbie Craig, on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous journal articles and contributing chapters to Management education publications and presented at conferences and workshops. John's other passions include photography and travel and he has written and published a number of photographic "coffee table" books on African Wildlife and Adventure Travel.

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