



Between a rock and a hard place

Michèle Moore, Director at engagementmoore,
looks at why the people piece gets forgotten

The general acceptance is that people are the very thing that can make the difference, so why are they often overlooked in a business?

Last year I read in Food Service Action that “Executives are making decisions 40% faster than a decade ago, however it is taking 20% longer for these decisions to be achieved due to a mix of a management and internal process.” My first thought was how did we get here? Followed by how can we fix this?

There seems to be an interesting paradox here.

Many companies have removed layers of management and downsized central support functions in the attempt to become more competitive and more agile, however the reality is often simply fewer people trying to do more work. Great top down initiatives are getting stuck in bottlenecks as they all fall on the shoulders of the same few middle managers. These middle managers are taking on more and more tasks (such as the everyday human resources tasks that have been pushed down from that slimmed down central function) and asked to produce (and often duplicate) more and more data (to feed the MI beast). Many also have to compensate for some of the low literacy, numeracy or IT skills at front line or supervisory level, still a feature of many parts of the hospitality sector.

So what gets sacrificed in the attempt to meet all those requirements? The people piece – the relationship building with employees, colleagues, clients and customers – despite the general acceptance that it is



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those very things that make the difference. Why? Is it because that neglect doesn't get noticed as quickly as the late report or the missing financial data?

To quote the late Stephen Covey, relationship building is important but not urgent until, inevitably, it turns into a crisis. For many people, finding the emotional energy for relationship building when overwhelmed and stressed is nigh on impossible.

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Our succession pipelines are also poor – there are too few people who are able to demonstrate a strategic view or the necessary breadth of experience, largely because they are busy doing day-to-day tasks (and/or those of the people below them). We try to remedy this by giving those middle managers developmental projects or assignments... that

just add to their workload (and get stuck in the important-but-not-urgent box).

How could we break out of this cycle?

- Invest in, educate and truly empower the front line.
- Provide a “just in time”, structured, blended approach to leadership development at all levels.
- Review, simplify and align performance management systems again and again until they are fit for purpose.
- Co-ordinate top down initiatives at senior level and make priorities clear, (is it that allergens awareness training or the customer service programme or that new IT system?)
- Have an email gatekeeper and outlaw lazy distribution lists or better still, have a weekly email free day.
- Encourage central functions to see themselves as service providers to operations.
- Or go big, go bold: turn your organisation upside down and really make people your managers' priority. 