

Five principles that will determine the new mainstream

Spirituality, meaning, inter-being, leadership and empathy: SMILE

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The past decade has been a moving one that has left none of us unaffected. Some will label it as daunting, while others will remember it as a major wake-up call. It encompassed 9/11, the Indonesian tsunami, major earthquakes in China and Haiti, but also, a communication outburst – equaling a simultaneously occurring bomb explosion, earthquake and tsunami – that enabled us to connect with old and new friends all over the world on a larger scale, at a faster pace, with greater frequency and at a lower price than ever before. The now-well-known social networks MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-in and a number of others have tremendously improved our ability to exchange information and learn about new developments. While some clumsy workplaces are still struggling with these trends and how to use them to their advantage, others long ago discovered the value of establishing and maintaining a presence on the most prominent of these networks, and are already benefiting from this presence.

The shift in the nature of work

One thing that also improved in the past decade was our awareness about the slow strides we made in a number of critical areas, such as the one that most of us have in common: work. It may be because the shift in the nature of work has not happened as rapidly as the above-mentioned factors, or maybe because there is too much at stake and no one likes to sacrifice a carefully created powerhouse. Regardless of the reasons, there is a disturbing obstruction that results in embarrassing numbers of dissatisfied workers, an ever-increasing discrepancy between rich and poor and an amazing reluctance to effectively change that.

For those who need a little mental refreshment, the shift we have experienced in the world of work is one where manufacturing and recurring services have increasingly been apportioned to countries where the price of labor is relatively low, while the innovative projects – the more sophisticated brain efforts – are concentrated in countries such as the US and several west-European countries.

This, of course, explains the surging numbers of adult learners in colleges and universities in those countries: in the past 30-40 years it has become completely normal to return to school for an educational upgrade, even in our 50s or 60s. In the US alone, 80 percent of the student population in higher education is classified as “adult learner”. That would definitely be an admirable trend, if only the understanding on how to deal with a knowledge-based workforce would also be expanded.

While a Gallup Poll from August 2010 shows that job satisfaction is slightly increasing compared to the beginning of the millennium, it seems that workplace stress is still a major problem. The indications are, according to this source, that either employers are starting to get the message, or employees are pleased more easily. It could, of course, also be some of both.

Need for a different approach

What definitely needs to be made clear is that a knowledge-based workforce requires a different approach from a manufacturing-based one. While the latter may be used to the old carrot and stick method when it comes down to performance, the knowledge worker looks for increased ownership, recognition, decision-making inclusion, team performance and proper communication about possible changes in work strategies and processes. With the 2008 economic crisis barely behind us, there may be a temporary increase in focus on extrinsic rewards, but it should be understood that knowledge workers do not just settle for that. They also expect intrinsic rewards: to be understood, respected, recognized, and feel that what they do makes sense and truly contributes to something better.

A crucial change that is therefore waiting to break through is the shift from short-term profit-focus; disengaged performance; ignorance toward stakeholders (employees, customers, community, etc.); autocratic treatment; and excessive individualism, to a more rewarding approach.

The old “mainstream”, created and maintained throughout the twentieth century, has to be laid to rest. The new “mainstream” is now more than ten years overdue. Some companies, such as Google, Whole Foods, Trader Joe, Costco, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks and IKEA, have already adopted it to a large extent. But there is still a major cluster of corporations that still has to come to terms with the mismatch between the way they manage their companies and the type of performance they expect. This group of companies needs to suspend its twentieth-century approach and gravitate toward the new (twenty-first century) mainstream; the sooner, the better. Once they do, the signal will be transmitted to business schools, and then adjustment of emphasis in business education can finally be considered in all seriousness and at a large scale as well.

The new mainstream: SMILE

The workplace paradigm that will prevail from here onward entails the following five interdependent elements:

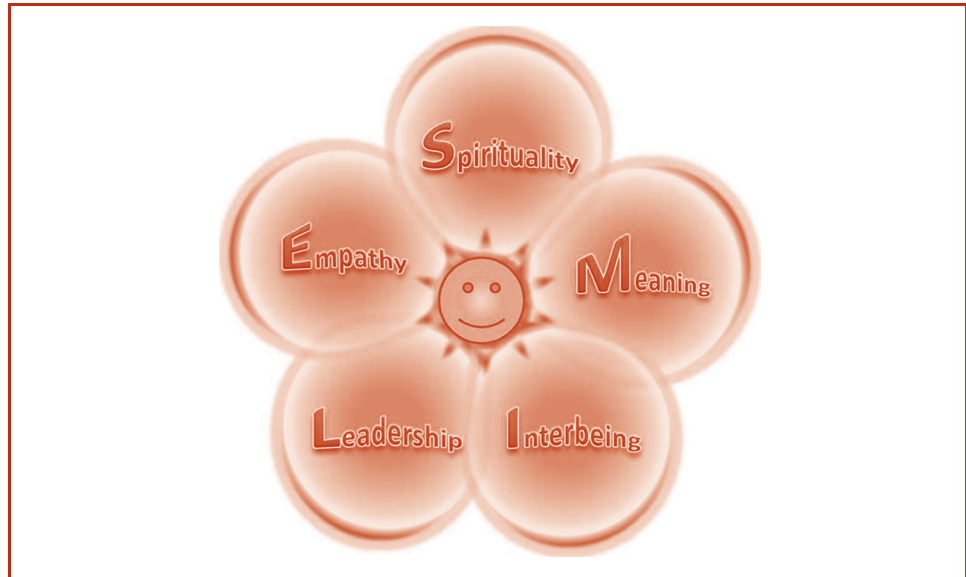
1. *Spirituality*. Greater acceptance of one another, not necessarily in the religious sense, but in regard to inter-human tolerance, collaboration and support toward a greater sense of belonging and a higher degree of appreciation, which will also benefit long-term organizational well-being. Southwest Airlines is a firm example of a corporation that has successfully implemented this concept. It is a joy to see how flight attendants and other employees flourish from the ownership they experience to “do their own thing” and make decisions they consider best at the moment.

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2. *Meaning.* Providing workers with the ability to see and understand the larger purpose of their work, so that they can feel more engaged in what they do, take more pride in their work, and possibly offer some great suggestions if they know that their ideas are seriously considered. The recent economic downturn has brought the importance of meaning to the forefront for a number of companies. A shoe-store manager in Chicago, who realized that something drastic had to be done to reverse dwindling sales, called all employees together and asked for their input. One employee suggested a collaboration with the local barber's shop, where many people got together to socialize. The barber agreed to hang a poster of himself with the store's shoes in his shop, received some complementary pairs of shoes in return, and sales picked up from there.
3. *Inter-being.* A society that communicates to such an extent as we all do today has greater awareness of the fact that no one is an island, but that everything we wear, eat, drive, see, read or enjoy in any other way, could only be possible through the interactions of millions of others worldwide. There are many ways to stimulate this awareness. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known and highly respected Vietnamese Buddhist monk who coined this word, explains the concept of inter-being by showing his audience a piece of paper. He asks them to consider how much was needed for this sheet of paper to come about; not only the natural resources such as sun and water for the trees, but also the tree cutter, and all people involved in all processes that ultimately led to the sheet of paper. Another well-known exercise is the raisin exercise, where everyone involved gets a raisin, and is asked to take minuscule bites, and chew very slowly, considering all the people and efforts that were needed to get this raisin in their hand. The philosophy behind these exercises is mindfulness: becoming more aware of the interconnectedness of everything.
4. *Leadership.* The notion that only the chief executive is a leader should definitely be placed in a museum. Today, we are all leaders to the extent we choose. We lead ourselves through life, decide when, where, or how we will obtain further development, and fulfill multiple positions in multiple settings. In my MBA courses I ask students to consider the multiple settings in which they daily engage: home and family, work, school, possibly their sports club or church, etc. The general finding is that they hold different positions in each of these environments. I then encourage them to consider Tom Peters' "You, Inc." paradigm, in which he explains that we can all choose to see ourselves as suppliers of a service, even if we have a 9-5 job. This paradigm shift, that we can keep to ourselves if we want to, helps us to see the leadership role we fulfill in our own lives regarding our livelihood. It is a powerful concept that can enhance motivation tremendously.
5. *Empathy.* The time that empathy was considered a "soft" skill, inappropriate in the workplace, is also long behind us. Especially after the repeated scandals in the past decade, we look for empathetic leaders, who are capable of relating to their knowledge workers, who listen and consider alternatives offered by their colleagues, and who base their decision on team rather than on individual insights, with inclusion of consequences for society. Empathy comes easier to mature adults than to younger ones, due to the way thinking happens in each group, as well as the degree of life experience each group harbors. However, it is a quality that can be thought, that that is moving out of the category "soft skills" into the category of "highly useful", as corporate leaders increasingly realize that knowledge workers appreciate leaders who can relate to their problems.

Figure 1 SMILE



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Most important insight: the SMILE principles cannot be implemented independently (Figure 1). They are mutually supportive and interconnected. Each of these principles can serve as a foundation as well as a result of the others. So, welcome to the new mainstream in work and management: SMILE!

Note

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