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SME SPOTLIGHT

Developing a culture of responsibility

SME bosses often find that people problems and conflicts come in the way of their employees focusing on the company's objectives and results, says SENTHIYL S

SMALL and medium-sized enterprises often do not have the capacity that larger organisations have for training and development. In most instances it is both a financial and capacity constraint. ('I cannot release the manager for two days!' is a line often heard.)

At the same time, despite these very constraints, SMEs need to get the most out of every one of their employees.

The good news is that it is possible. The bad news is that very few people know how it can be done. This is because there is a problem (little known up till recently) that does not allow people to stay focused on the results of the company. In fact, it does the opposite: it keeps people focused on themselves and their doings.

This focus on oneself invites people problems. These people problems manifest in a thousand different ways, negatively impacting relationships, communication, trust, accountability, motivation, team-building, conflict resolution and leadership.

If leaders were to reflect on the amount of time they spend trying to address their litany of people problems and keep staff focused on results, it can be mind boggling. In fact it drains the energy of these leaders and substantially undermines the potential and performance of these companies.

As SMEs tend to be structurally lean, productivity and leadership acumen are the keys to success. SMEs therefore have to find effective ways to bring out the potential of their people and ensure that they are in sync with company objectives, mission and vision.

However, in trying to achieve this, SMEs could sometimes be barking up the wrong tree. HR departments scramble to implement workplace initiatives to build team cohesion and motivation. More training programmes are prescribed. But what if people problems in their many different manifestations are nothing more than symptomatic of a single deeper problem which keeps us self-focused and, therefore, in a state of resistance?

Fear of losing out

Let's take a real-life scenario. This is an organisation with about 150 employees. The culture in the organisation is such that the people are only motivated to please and impress their CEO and senior managers. This promotes a string of middle level managers who protect their turf and refrain from co-operating with team members for fear of 'losing out'.

This leads to a culture that hampers creativity, innovation and trust, and breeds poor relationships and a host of people problems. The CEO himself, therefore, carries the responsibility of innovation and idea generation and drives them personally. He constantly laments the lack of independent thinking, vision and cohesion among his managers.

What are the implications of this trend? An organisation (not atypical) where people are trapped in a box, unable to focus on outcomes and results because they are too focused on themselves and on justifying their own actions. Teamwork and team spirit are thrown out the door. Conflicts become routine. Matters that could be resolved within minutes over a phone call take days and a chain of emails, and in most cases only with the intervention of senior managers or even the CEO.

This type of situation is not uncommon in SMEs and even larger organisations. It leads to under-performance and wastage of resources and energy. SME leaders and staff, therefore, need to figure a way to stay focused on the results. In each of the key directions at work - towards customers, co-

workers, employees and managers - leaders of SMEs need to empower themselves and their people to be able to move forward to realise their goals and vision.

By mastering the keys to focusing on results, and developing a culture of responsibility rather than of blame, people can then clearly determine, prioritise and order all of their workplace efforts. This eventually leads to a focused, aligned and mutually supportive and high performing environment, where people are accountable for their results and their impact on the ability of others to get results.

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